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Bokuto Uno
ILLUSTRATION BY
Ruria Miyuki
Reign of the Seven Spellblades

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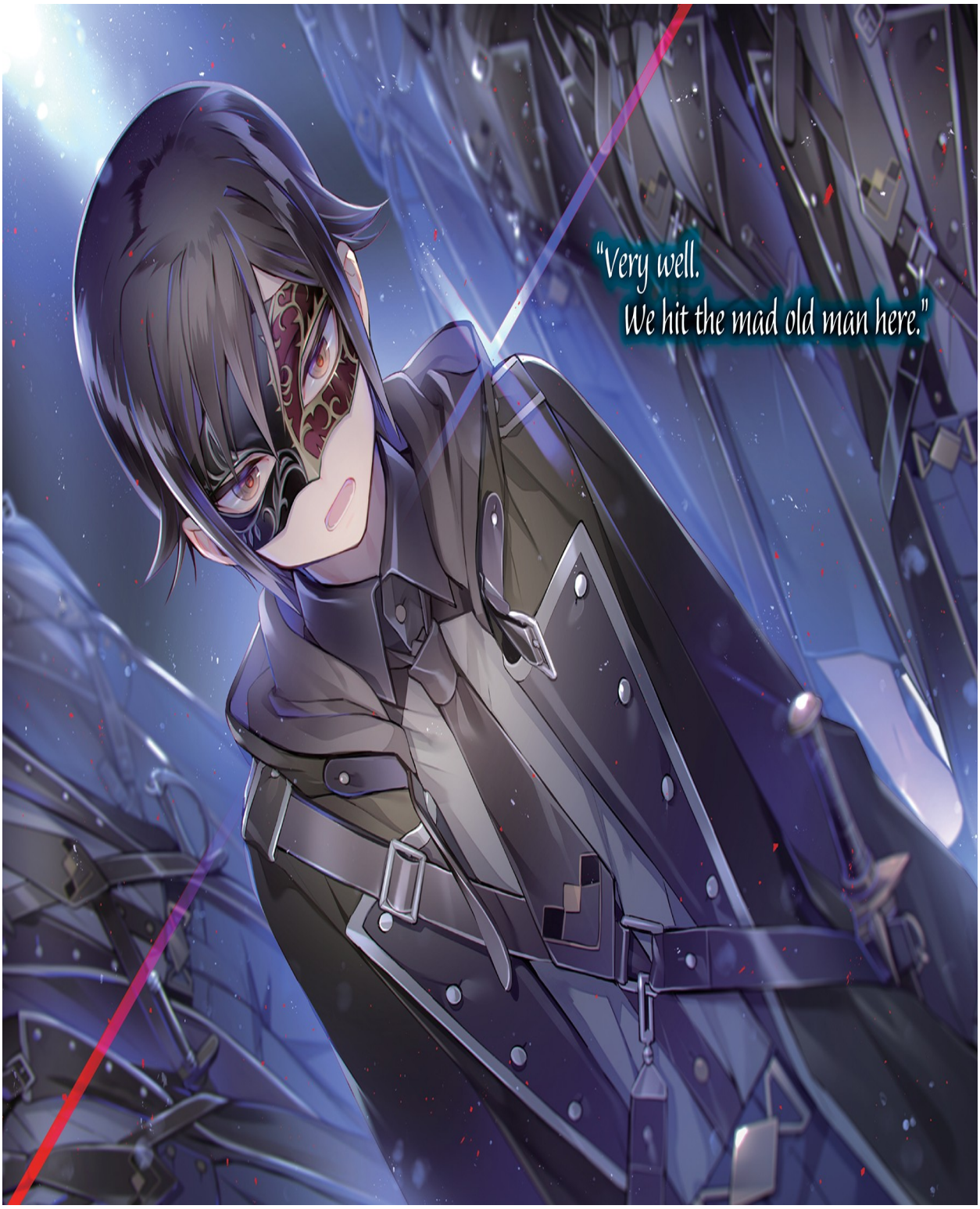
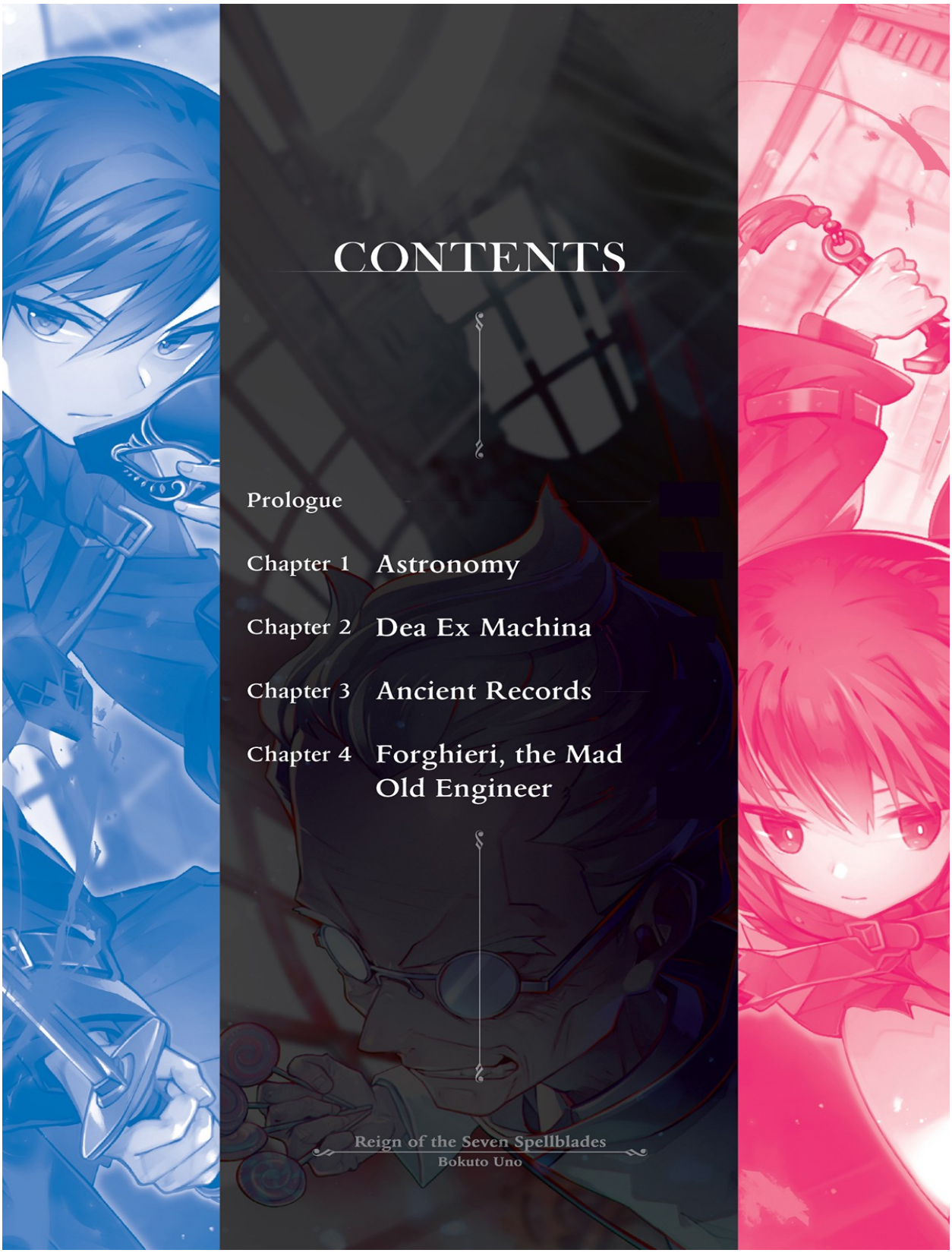
Oliver Horn
"You're here? Both of you...?!"
Gwyn Sherwood
Shannon Sherwood
"You're sweet..."
"...Huh?"
Katie Aalto

"After them, Nanao!"
Enrico Forghieri
"You may join us— if you can keep up! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha!"
Pete Reston
"On it!"
Nanao Hibiya


"Very well.
We hit the mad old man here."



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YEN ON

New York

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Characters

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

Second-Years

Oliver Horn
The story's protagonist. Jack-of-all-trades, master of none. Swore revenge on the seven instructors who killed his mother.

Nanao Hibiya
A samurai girl from Azia. Believes that Oliver is her destined sword partner.

Katie Aalto
A girl from Farnland, a nation belonging to the Union. Has a soft spot for the civil rights of demi-humans.

Guy Greenwood
A boy from a family of magical farmers. Honest and friendly. Has a knack for magical flora.

Pete Reston
A studious boy born to nonmagicals. Capable of switching between male and female bodies.

Michela McFarlane
Eldest daughter of the prolific McFarlane family. A master of the pen and sword, she looks out for her friends.

First-Years

Tullio Rossi
A lone wolf who taught himself the sword by ignoring the fundamentals. Lost to Oliver in a duel.

Teresa Carste
Oliver's closest vassal, aiding his revenge as a covert operative. Moves on her own terms and shows few emotions.

~ Richard Andrews

~ Stacy Cornwallis ~ Fay Willock ~ Joseph Albright

Fifth-Years

Vera Miligan
A witch who supports demi-human rights. Fought Oliver and his friends over Katie but has since taken an interest in the group.

Diana Ashbury
Kimberly's top broomsport athlete. Nanao's broomriding skills catch her attention.

Sixth-Years

Alvin Godfrey
Student council president. Nicknamed Purgatory by his peers. Boasts incredible firepower.

Shannon Sherwood
A gentle girl and Oliver's cousin. Supports Oliver's secret activities as his vassal.

Cyrus Rivermoore
A necromancer who controls the bones of the dead.

Gwyn Sherwood
A quiet young man and Oliver's cousin. Supports Oliver's secret activities as his vassal.

Instructors

Enrico Forghieri
Magical engineering instructor. Prone to outrageous lessons designed to maim students.

Theodore McFarlane
Chela's father and the man who sent Nanao to Kimberly.

Esmeralda
Kimberly's headmistress. Proudly stands at the apex of magical society.

Seventh-Years

Karlie Buckle
Acts friendly but keeps people at arm's length. One of Oliver's comrades.

Vanessa Aldiss
Magical biology instructor. Feared by her students for her wild personality.

Darius Grenville
Alchemy instructor. Slain by Oliver and currently considered missing.

~ Frances Gilchrist ~ Luther Garland ~ Dustin Hedges

Prologue

Prologue

Squad Six was a rock, they'd said. With the famous Sea Silencer in charge, they were the elite. They stood firm. Nothing got past them. No matter what came out of the Gate, they had nothing to fear.

She'd gotten that bad feeling right away. She was usually right about these things. And no one rocked the boat like Chloe Halford. She'd earned that rep while still in school.

And so the night before they embarked, at the party, she'd cut herself off after her second drink and made her way to another table without so much as a by-your-leave.

"Watch your asses if you don't wanna wipe tomorrow."

It was hard to take that warning as anything but an insult. Back at her table, her two colleagues were doing spit takes. And the Gnostic Hunters at the table Chloe faced were all battle-scarred veterans—the last people in the world you wanted to start trouble with.

"Sorry! She's had a bit too much!"

"Let's get you some fresh air, Chloe!"

Her colleagues caught up to her, each grabbing an arm. But she stood firm, not budging an inch. She even wound up one arm like she *wanted* to throw a few punches.

"Wait—was that an augur just now, Two-Blade?"

One man had taken the trash talk in stride. Even in a crowd of hunters, this individual was built like a tank. The commander of Squad Six, Jacob Rutland—the Sea Silencer. He was over fifty years old, had never failed a mission, and had kept his squad turnover under 5 percent. In a job where full-squad wipeouts were all too common, that in itself was astonishing—but what had sealed his claim to fame was an incident at a harbor town.

A giant sea monster's death throes following a naval battle had caused a two-hundred-foot tidal wave. It was headed right for a coastal town, and doom seemed all but certain—but his squad had saved it. The stormy night passed, and the residents woke to calm waters, upon which stood a mage: Rutland, who'd silenced the seas. The origin of his epithet.

"Nah," Chloe replied, like the Sea Silencer's legend meant nothing to her. "Just a feeling. My family's into auguries, but it was never my style. Can't do squat with a crystal ball."

But despite her flippant tone, there was a grim look in her eye. Not taking her gaze off the mages before her, she added, "But sometimes my gut is right on the money. This feels like one of those times. There's a nasty bit of discord ahead of you. And I'm getting some glimpses of specifics… You two over there! Feeling something off in your mana circulation? Left leg and right shoulder? That could cause a wipeout."

The mages she pointed at didn't say a word. But the Sea Silencer was listening. He'd mentioned the same thing the day before. And Chloe's squad

had just arrived that evening—unlikely she'd had time to dig up that sort of intel.

"…You have the knack, but never made a craft of it, then? Well, shit."

Jacob knew now she wasn't just stirring the pot. He stilled his squad with a glare, electing to hear her out.

"You guys do solo raids, right? I hear that's 'cause every squad you were on threw in the towel."

"Yeah, I could've opened a day spa," Chloe snarled. "But the same goes for all Gnostic Hunters. Every squad's kept together by a razor-thin margin. And once you're in the thick of things, everyone does it their way. We're *mages*, that's why."

"True enough." Jacob chuckled. "You're covering a chunk of the Bangash?"

"Yep, but I don't sense a thing," she said, finger on her brow. "Not even a tingle."

"Nobody can predict where the Gates'll open." The Sea Silencer shook his head. "Augury pros narrow it down as best they can, and then we're placed accordingly. We've got our orders. Or are you saying these hunches of yours are more accurate than real oracles?"

"Nah. They're *just* hunches. When they're wrong, they're wrong. No more use than that."

"So what use is your warning?" he asked, probing her intent.

Chloe scratched her head, looking sheepish.

"…Some things make a difference," she said. "How long you hang on. Whether you know someone's coming or not."

"……?" Jacob and his group frowned, not sure what she meant.

Conscious of their eyes on her, Chloe leaned back, letting her words sink in for a moment. Then she slammed both hands down on the table.

"If anything happens, I *will* come and rescue you. Don't you *dare* give up. Get that into your skulls."

She spat each phrase like she was chiseling them into the hunters' bodies. She went from left to right, staring each squad member in the eye with a look like a command: *Don't die. Survive.*

And that silenced even these hardened hunters.

No one answered her. They knew this was all she'd ever meant to tell them. Chloe Halford was at their table for that, and that alone.

"This drink's on me," the Sea Silencer said. He used his white wand to pull over a stool, and Chloe parked herself on it. Her two colleagues watched, nerves frayed.

Jacob pulled a little bottle out of his coat pocket and tipped just a few drops into an empty glass. Chloe looked baffled. There was already a big bottle of spirits on the table, and everyone else was helping themselves to it.

"…Mixings? Let's stick to straight shots."

“Of cheap gin in a backwoods watering hole? This town’s deep country, and I ain’t griping, but you’d be better off choking down fresh-squeezed mandrake.”

“I don’t hold with the sweet stuff. I want my booze to sit up and smack me.”

“Sheesh, you drink like an asshole. Don’t worry, it’s bitters. It won’t make it sweet.”

With that, the Sea Silencer poured gin on top of the brown drops. He put the glass in front of Chloe; she shrugged and took a gulp.

“…Mm?!”

She let out a weird noise, then tilted the glass all the way back. Once drained, she slammed it down on the table and barked, “Another!”

“’Fraid not,” Jacob said, holding the bottle of bitters upside down. Chloe looked crestfallen; the Sea Silencer looked rather pleased with himself. “I could have another for you the next time we meet. *After* this battle’s done.”

“Argh, you’re gonna do me like that?!” she wailed, clutching her head.

The Gnostic Hunters were all laughing now. Chloe let loose several curses that would make high-society types blanch, then got to her feet with tears in her eyes.

“I’ll hold you to that!” she yelled. “Don’t you dare forget!”

“Same here,” he said, arms folded. “You wind us up like this and die first, I’ll make sure people are laughing about it for centuries. Just you watch.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” Chloe snorted. She turned on her heel, flinging an arm over each of her two companion’s shoulders. “Good night—and good luck, Jacob the Sea Silencer.”

“Same to you, Chloe Two-Blade.”

And they went their separate ways, leaving behind a small promise. One that should not have taken long to keep.

“…Ha-ha… You really did get here first…”

His voice a rasp, his face ashen, the Sea Silencer was propped against a rock on a hill. To say he’d been beaten to a pulp would be an understatement.

“……”

Chloe was staring down at him. He’d lost his left leg from below the knee, and his sides were torn open in three places, broken ribs peeking out. The rest of his wounds were too numerous to count. And given the extent of his injuries, most unnerving of all was how little blood was flowing.

The cause was the brown fibrous substance buried in the gaps of his flesh: arcane roots woven through his entire body, draining him of blood and magic. Chloe’s two companions went to heal him, saw that substance, and froze. They *knew*. The Sea Silencer’s life was finished; his bodily functions served only as a seedbed.

“…Don’t look so upset,” he told Chloe, who remained speechless. “We didn’t give up. Not a one of us. I swear.”

He glanced down at the body cradled in his arms—one of his squad members. There was no need to check for signs of life. Not even a mage could survive losing half their head.

"…Your hunch was right. The augurs totally blew the scale of the invasion. Look at the state of things; they've swallowed up the whole valley. We're a step outside the tír…"

Chloe and the others followed his gaze. The sight before them was literally not of this world.

Once, there had been a town in this valley, decent sized for these parts; nearly two thousand had lived here. They grew cotton and carrots and raised magical silkworms. The ten mages who lived here had convinced the villagers to evacuate. Abandon everything they'd ever known.

And now, as Chloe's group peered down into the valley—there was no town. No trace of it remained. The massive wyrms swimming through the soil had demolished everything, churning it to oblivion. They'd scattered countless seeds that grew until the land was covered in a towering forest within a matter of hours. Their role complete, some of the wyrms' corpses were already entangled in the trees' roots, fertilizing them—a sight that proved who was in charge. Plants held sway, and beasts served at their whim—the polar opposite of *this* world, an attempt to impose an alien order upon it.

Above this alarmingly luxuriant forest lay the swirling black portal through which they had arrived. Even as Chloe watched, another deluge of seeds fell from it and burrowed themselves into the wyrm-plowed land, devouring nutrients before proliferating.

Several figures watched the invasion's progress from the skies above. Each twenty feet tall, their forms were dubiously reminiscent of a man in a straw cape. But their bodies were made from tightly woven roots, their outstretched limbs two thick branches, the tips of which were shaped like jagged shears.

These figures weren't human, nor were they any sort of magiflora. They were something distinct even from the writhing plants below. Shuddering from their palpable might, Chloe spoke.

"Those are…gardeners? Twelve…no, thirteen of them?"

"Fifteen. We managed to take two down…barely. The moment they appeared, we knew how it would end. Sending seraphs in right away? Proof their god means business."

Jacob's voice was a spiteful whisper. When Chloe still offered no response, he looked back at her, adding, "You came all this way for nothing. We've already lost. Retreat and regroup. Two or three squads coming can't do a thi— Gah!"

He groaned; the roots were digging deeper. Vines stretching up from his wounds wove together, replacing the missing pieces of his body with new ones. The thing inside him would not even allow him to die. It was now

robbing him of the last lingering trace of his own mind, forcing him to serve as their puppet.

"…Can I ask one last favor? Afraid I missed my shot at ending things myself."

The Sea Silencer saw the writing on the wall and spoke his piece. Chloe nodded and drew her athame. As his chest rose and fell, she placed the tip off-center, directly above his heart.

"…Sorry I failed to keep my promise."

"Don't worry about it. We both did."

And with that, she sank her blade into his chest, destroying his heart—the lynchpin of the circulatory systems for both blood and mana. She was delicate, to avoid causing him pain; thorough, so that nothing could make use of him once he was gone; and respectful, honoring the great mage and the life he had led.

"Ignis."

Once the Sea Silencer had slid, relieved, into eternal slumber, Chloe set him on fire. When a corpse became infected by a tír being, it *had* to be burned on the spot, reduced to ash—lest it cause greater calamity. Destroying the heart beforehand prevented the inhabiting creature from resisting while the corpse burned.

This funeral rite was the first thing every Gnostic Hunter learned. Ever since her first day on the front lines, Chloe Halford had repeated this procedure more times than she could count.

"…Chloe…"

"…We're here with you."

Her two colleagues spoke but did not move. Chloe watched as the corpse burned into oblivion.

"…What do we do?" she murmured.

The pair glanced at each other. It was always *their* job to make the rational choice. Chloe—their leader—was horrifically bad at that.

"I'm afraid he was right. We should retreat and find other—"

"Not that."

She cut him off, not allowing him to play his role. That was all it took for them to know how bad things were. Their leader was in no state to listen to a rational argument.

"Once this fight is over, where do I drink, and what?" Chloe roared, clenching her fists. A broom shot down from the sky above, as if it sensed her frustration.

Chloe's companions tried to grab her shoulders, but she slipped away, her feet on the broom's handle, riding it like a surfboard.

She hurtled toward the base of the valley and the sinister forest within. Sensing her approach, the wyrms ceased plowing and attacked. They swam through the soil like sea serpents through waves. In the face of a threat so great it had swallowed up a town, Chloe could have flown upward—but instead, she jumped off her broom, falling toward them.

“Gladio Ferrum Directum!”

Pouring all her fury into a triple incantation, she drew *both* her athames—dual wielding these had earned her the Two-Blade epithet. Swinging right and left, she mowed down everything in sight, slicing the worms like carrots. Still not satisfied, she felled a hundred of the uncanny trees like a scythe through tall grass. By now, she had the attention of the gardeners above.

“This is *our* garden, you sons of bitches! Get your nasty hands off it!”

Her roar shook the skies, issuing an ultimatum to every tír fragment her eyes met. Countless eldritch creatures swarmed from beneath the fallen trees; like the wyrms, they served the needs of their flora masters. If she inhibited the forest’s growth, then she was their foe and must be attacked.

“Come back! You’ll get yourself killed, Chloe!”

“You don’t even have a plan! We can’t fight all this on our own!”

Her teammates caught up with her reckless frontal assault, athames raised, guarding her flanks and back. The hit-and-run squad was thirty strong, but the wave of twisted creatures was too much for them. Even if they managed to weather this assault, the gardeners waited in the skies—the same foes that had massacred the Sea Silencer’s squad. On any other day, a swift retreat would have been their only option.

“Yeah, you’re right! That’s the correct response! So obvious even a child would know it!” Chloe roared. “But I say, ‘Nope!’ and when that happens, reckless and crazy don’t get to argue. You know that!”

Her spells mowing down the advancing horde, always leading the charge, Chloe never had much truck with reason.

“This grief! Frustration! And rage! It’s all part of me! It *is* me! If I choke that down, if I even *try* and stop it from gushing out—I won’t be me anymore! There’ll be no trace of Chloe Halford’s soul!”

Her colleagues shook their heads. There was no arguing with her now.

Chloe’s team had never once had anyone on it who wasn’t there by choice. And there wasn’t a Gnostic Hunter alive who didn’t know full well just how peerless Chloe Two-Blade was. Everyone knew she was prone to stunts like this. And *because* she was like this, *because* she insisted on following her heart, no matter where it led—her team followed *her*.

“So this is where we die? We could clear a path for you to run, Emmy.”

“…Right back atcha, Ed.”

Her two closest colleagues were chatting behind her. Not a snowball’s chance in hell that either of them would leave her side till the bitter end. All of them were laughing. Their camaraderie had been set in stone as students, and it seemed clear they were taking it to their graves.

“I *knew* you’d be doing something stupid. You always are!”

But that indulgent fantasy was blasted away by a rain of fire. The encroaching swarm was replaced with a wave of death, one that almost swallowed them with it.

“……?!”

"……Huh?"

Scorched earth and countless corpses. Chloe's companions gaped, clueless as to the cause. But her eyes had already locked onto it on the high ground to the northwest: a row of golems along the horizon—and the diminutive old man leading them.

"…'Sup. How you been, Instructor Enrico?" Chloe waved at him like she'd spotted a friend arriving late at a party. "What's with the army? Couldn't let your favorite students go?"

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! Indeed, I've been fit to be tied! So worried poor Esmeralda and Edgar would get swept up in your latest harebrained scheme!"

"Don't try and hide it! You know you love me, too."

She stomped her feet in protest. Leaving his golems to continue their bombardment, Enrico hopped on a small hover golem, flying into the basin. Joining his former students, Enrico Forghieri glanced skyward at the portal.

"They sure did punch a big one! We were way off about the scale of their faith," he said.

"Must have been a pretty fair number hidden, out of HQ's grasp," Chloe replied. "Nothing else explains the size of this invasion."

"Clearly, our surveillance practices need review. But first, we'll have to clear these out!"

The old man never took his eyes off the sky. The gardeners had simply watched him this whole time, but now they were on the move. Chloe had sliced up half their wyrms, and Enrico's golems had burned away their forest. A major setback to the task their god had entrusted to them, and their fury was palpable.

Chloe was grinning. As it should be. Come and get some.

Didn't matter to her what world her foes came from. Didn't matter if these things weren't even technically alive. If they had a mind to go against her, she didn't give a damn if she was fighting a bad drunk or a tír invader.

"Leave the rabble to the golems. Only the gardeners matter. Instructor, can you take half?"

"You never did have a head for math. You clearly meant two-thirds."

"Now you're talking, grandpa! What say we go first come, first served?"

Even strategy sessions were a fight with Chloe involved. Her team rolled their eyes, but these powerful reinforcements had every hunter present back in the game, ready to win. Light was building at the tips of every athame. And no mage alive was generous enough to take a beating lying down.

"Oh, lemme add a clause! Whichever side loses picks up the bar tab! Whaddaya say?"

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! I certainly don't mind! I love it when old students buy me drinks. A fine way to respect your mentors!"

With the afterparty planned out, there was only one thing left on the agenda. The harshest task of any and all mages—protecting the safety of the world, as Gnostic Hunters do.

The boy's consciousness drifted up from the sea of ancient memories.

"……"

He gritted his teeth. This was hardly the first such dream he'd had since he began harboring her soul. But this one was unusually vivid, and the contents particularly galling.

All of that had been trampled on. Friendship, trust, his mother's soul—and all at the hands of that mad old man. The shadows of that betrayal as dark as their bond had once been bright. A maddening storm of queries and anger swirled through Oliver's mind.

"…? What's wrong? You look awful."

In the next bed over, Pete had woken up. Suddenly conscious of the tension in his cheeks, Oliver tried to relax them—and failed. Instead, he looked away.

"It's nothing," he said. "Just…an unpleasant dream."

CHAPTER 1

Astronomy

CHAPTER 1

Astronomy

A graduate once famously said that the main task of a first-year Kimberly student was to get all the crying and screaming out of their system.

"And that's how you handle magical silkworms. Don't you dare tell me you didn't get it, first-years."

This class might well be on the curriculum for that sole purpose. Vanessa Aldiss, magical biology instructor, was smirking at her first-year pupils over the ashes of an insect's corpse. Every student present gulped.

The silkworm had seemed so friendly. Then the cocoon had turned black, and a hideous winged monster had emerged—only to be dispatched by Vanessa's spell. Every step was exactly as it had been for Oliver's group the year before.

"Let's get started. You successfully make five outta ten of these things cocoon, you pass. Easy!" Vanessa barked. "I doubt anyone here's this dumb, but if you mess it up, don't try and peel off the cocoon. One dipshit nearly got her hand eaten last year. Can't stand having more than one of those kids per decade."

And with her shrug as the signal, the pressure was on. The task before these first-years was less a matter of skill than of keeping the mind steady as you weathered the storm. Quite a few of them looked down at their box of silkworms and failed to make the first move.

"…You okay, Dean?" Peter Cornish asked, concerned for his old friend.

"…Huh? Wh-why wouldn't I be? I got this!" Dean Travers spluttered, finally springing to life. He drew his white wand from his hip and pointed it at a silkworm—then froze up a second time, unable to picture himself succeeding.

"…Hmph."

Across the table from him, a much smaller girl was making short work of things, spending barely a second on each silkworm. Nine of them formed proper white cocoons, but one went black, like the demonstration.

The tall girl next to her—Rita Appleton—looked surprised. "…Wait—Teresa? You're already done?"

"Not worth wasting time on. **Flamma.**"

Her voice its usual monotone, Teresa Carste swiftly burned the failure. Rita was still gaping at her, so she gave the girl a blank look.

"Get it over with. Waiting is tedious."

"I'd—I'd like to, but…my nerves…"

"Don't take it that seriously. Failure just means death."

"I'm gonna die?!"

“You? The silkworms, of course.”

Rita was shaking like a leaf, but Teresa remained unmoved. Peter looked really impressed.

“You don’t flinch easy, huh? You’re really good at this, Teresa.”

“I-it’s not *that* hard! I can do this, too!”

Competition pushed Dean into motion, and he pointed his wand at a silkworm. He was clearly leaning way too far forward.

“H-hold on, Dean,” Peter said, worried. “If you’re that tense—”

But his warning went in one ear and out the other. Far too much magic shot out of Dean’s wand, and the result—seconds later, the silkworm formed a black cocoon before bursting out of it.

“Ahhhhh!”

“Augh, I knew it!”

Peter wailed as the bug attacked his friend. Dean was waving his wand around and chanting fire spells but barely aiming—and the target was small and swift. Seeing it flying circles around him, Peter raised his athame.

“Duck, Dean! I can’t aim like this!”

“Sh-shut up! Stay back! I can handle— Gah!”

Despite his protests, before he could even fire off another spell—the bug’s mandibles sank into his wrist. The pain made him drop his wand, and students swarmed around him.

Vanessa glanced toward the uproar from the sidelines. “Another year, another kid got bit. The annual idiot.”

“Dean…!” Rita jumped in to help, but the insect came after her. She fired off a spell only to catch air, and its mandibles closed in on her throat.

But right before her eyes, the insect—split into two.

“…Huh…?”

Rita stood stunned, her athame raised.

The two halves of the bug fell to the ground, and the small girl behind it—Teresa—sheathed her athame. Nobody else had even seen her move. She’d drawn and sliced with practiced ease.

“…What are you doing?”

“…Uh…”

Teresa’s eyes had turned on Dean, where he sat clutching his wrist. No scorn or contempt, just genuine bafflement, as in: *How was this outcome even possible?*

“We were taught how to handle them. Spell or blade, if you have an athame, you can dispatch it. At the very least, you can dodge.”

Apparently *can’t* wasn’t part of her vernacular. She’d been raised to handle these things like any basic function. That much, Dean got—and it unnerved him. Teresa watched fear flicker across his face before clapping her hands together as if she’d just worked it out.

“Oh, I see. That makes sense—you’re inept.”

She nodded, then seemed to lose all interest, moving away. The cold, hard insult—she didn't mean it as one, but an insult it was—left Dean's lips moving wordlessly.

A second later, anger caught up with him.

"Wha…?! Say that again!"

The words shot out of him like a geyser.

"…What are they fighting about this time?"

Oliver was watching them from the window of a large room on the second story. Dean yelling, Teresa with her back to him, Peter and Rita scrambling to talk them down—clearly, the first two were to blame.

"Hah!"

With Oliver's attention elsewhere, Pete rushed at him with his athame in hand to take full advantage of his friend's lapse. But Oliver had kept enough wits about him to respond, deflecting the blow away from his chest, and with Pete off-balance, he kicked the boy's legs out from under him. Pete landed on his backside.

"Too eager, Pete."

"W-well, you weren't even looking!"

Pete was soon back on his feet, fuming. Oliver forgot about the view outside, fully focusing on the bespectacled boy.

"Sorry. I just noticed the new kids making trouble. Won't happen again."

He hit his stance once more. His distraction had been a slap in the face, an insult to Pete's dedication, and he owed it to him to remain focused.

"Nope. You need a new teacher."

"Oh?"

Someone picked Pete up by his collar, easily supporting his full weight with one arm.

"Mr. Albright?" Oliver said, taken aback.

This arrogant interloper had been a tough opponent during the first-years' battle royal.

"I've been watching," he said with a snort. "You're too gentle. He's not a toddler."

"I don't mean to—"

"If you don't, that's even worse."

Albright didn't let him finish. He turned on his heel, hauling Pete away.

"Come, Pete Reston. I'm not letting anyone whose name I learned stay a nobody forever. I'm gonna train you myself."

"L-let me down first!"

Dangling at Albright's arm's length, Pete flailed about in protest and was soon dropped on the ground. Pete glared up at him—then his eyes started flitting to Oliver and back.

"…Okay," he said. "Let's give this a shot, Mr. Albright."

"Pete?!" Oliver gasped, unable to believe his ears.

Pete took a few steps closer, pointing right at his face.

“Just you watch,” he said. “When I get back, I’m gonna land a hit on *you*.”

And with that, he spun around and ran after Albright. Oliver had no words.

Then a hand patted him on the shoulder.

“Ah-ha-ha! You ’ave lost your precious pupil. Fret not, Oliver! I would be ’onored to take ’is place.”

“……”

This tall smiler was Tullio Rossi. Another opponent in the battle royal, but Oliver was long past caring about that history. The only thing in his mind was the sight of his stolen student training at the hands of another teacher. They were already starting.

“First question,” said Albright. “Why are you weak?”

“…My techniques aren’t polished,” Pete replied, looking sullen already.

Albright rolled his eyes, like he was dealing with an amateur.

“Already wrong. What you think are techniques are *forms*. You’re just rehearsing memorized choreography like some sort of puppet.”

“…I am…?”

“Forms become techniques when they’re a seamless part of the fight. What you need now is to learn how that feels. To start, show me the move you think you’re best at.”

Pete thought for a second, then raised his dominant left hand, taking the mid-tier Rizett-style lightning stance. From there, he lunged forward, unleashing a series of thrusts. As he did, he smacked the floor with his right hand, using that force to push himself back into his original stance. The swift recovery showed that despite the lack of polish, he was controlling his center of gravity well. Albright narrowed his eyes.

“Rizett’s Hero’s Charge? As a form, not bad.”

“How does that become technique?”

“On its own, it’s nothing but a gamble. To make it decisive, you need to put together a battle plan.”

Pete put his hand to his chin, thinking.

“Picture it,” Albright said. “It’s one thing when you just started, but you’ve got a year’s worth of experience under your robe. You’ve watched top fighters go at it up close. Traded blows with them in practice. If your eyes can see, you’ve started to figure out how a sword art fight works.”

As prompted, Pete ran several of these fights through his mind’s eye. With the Hero’s Charge as his finisher, he went back through the fight leading up to that. A number of patterns he’d personally experienced came to mind, and he picked one with solid odds that he felt capable of reproducing. A moment later, he found himself in a stance. His athame at eye level, held vertically. The Lanoff high stance.

“Exactly. A tad obvious, but it works. Pull your foe’s attention upward. The crux of Hero’s Charge is the vertical motion and the shift in range. Get your opponent used to trading blows above chest height, wait for them to

fire a spell at your chest—that's the perfect moment to unleash your technique."

Pete had passed his test and earned a trace of a smile.

"If it lands, you've won, but if it fails, you'll pay for it—true for any lunging move. But you've already got the nerves. That alone I'll praise you for."

"…Coming from you, it feels wrong."

"Hmph. So whose praise do you want?"

Albright clearly knew the answer. Pete stiffened. He managed to keep himself from looking toward the person he had in mind, but he nonetheless felt his cheeks burning.

"You're an open book." Albright chuckled. "Fair enough. Oliver's attention is a prize."

"…Shut up…!"

To hide how much that rattled him, Pete turned back, still in the high stance, ready to test it. Albright responded, calmly drawing his own athame.

"Good intensity. Take that blade and *make* me shut up."

Meanwhile, Oliver was trading blows with Rossi, keeping one eye on Pete's training.

"…What are they talking about…?"

"You are wide open, Oliver!"

Rossi took that as an opportunity to attack. A tricky move, well off the beaten path—but in the year since his defeat at Oliver's hands, he'd melded it to Koutz-style techniques, making it even harder to deal with. Unreadable footwork, Flash Wisp to blind you and move where you least expected him to be.

"Oof—?!"

But a heel slammed into his plexus. A counterblow, doubling the impact—and Rossi was on his knees. Realizing he'd hit too hard, Oliver quickly came over.

"Sorry, Rossi. Overextended a bit."

"Urghhh… Be 'onest, you are working through some issues!"

He sounded as peeved as he was frustrated. Not only had Oliver been clearly distracted, he'd still easily handled the attack. The difference in their abilities was all too clear. While Rossi had been rebuilding himself, Oliver had charged on ahead.

"…And 'ere I am, eating dust."

Clutching his stomach, Rossi was grinning through the pain. This was what he wanted. What good was a goal that neither changed nor adapted?

"Seiiiiii!"

A bellow echoed through the room, grabbing both boys' attention. In the corner opposite the pair, an Azian girl was furiously trading blows with the sword arts instructor, Garland.

Seeing Oliver's eyes glued to the exchange, Rossi sighed. "…Now it is 'er turn? You do not lack for distractions, Oliver."

“Okay, I admit it. But how can you *not* look? You’re doing the same thing.”

“Ha-ha, that I am! Nanao is a sight to behold! ’Er blows grow sharper by the hour.”

Rossi took his place by Oliver, hand on chin, in full observation mode. Sparks flew from Nanao’s blade as she took a wide step in. Garland dodged by a hairbreadth, his athame caressing the girl’s arm.

The sword arts instructor had flawlessly handled her assault, and as they regrouped, he said, “That big step was careless. Don’t confuse courage with recklessness. Once more!”

“Understood!”

Taking instruction with her characteristic alacrity, Nanao was soon cheerfully squaring off against the master again. As Oliver watched, enraptured, Chela approached him.

“He’s not holding back with her anymore. I’m sure he sees her potential.”

“Yes.” Oliver nodded. “The best student with the best teacher. She’s bound to get even better.”

An instant later, they all jumped—at the sound of a voice from *above*.

“Enjoying yourself, Luther? If you like her that much, why not officially take her as an apprentice?”

This man had the same hairstyle as Chela but was standing upside down, his feet on the ceiling. As the students jumped and looked up, Garland smiled—like he’d known this man was here the whole time.

“She’s only in her second year, Theodore. The time for trying a bit of everything, not narrowing your focus.”

“No rush to pin her down, then? You couldn’t be less like Darius there. Naturally, I mean that as a compliment.”

It was obvious from their tone that they were old friends. But while their exchange was breezy, Oliver’s expression was guarded—and Chela glanced at both him and Theodore, raising an eyebrow.

“……”

“…Sigh…”

“? What is it?” Rossi asked. “You two look like you ’ave just bitten a lemon.”

They both ignored him, and as they watched in silence, Garland spoke again.

“If you’re here, why not help teach? Show these kids your Rizett style.”

“I can hardly refuse a request for the blade master himself! Especially with my beloved daughter’s eyes on me. By all means, let me strut.”

Winking at Chela, Theodore flipped down to the floor. He took Nanao’s place, facing Garland at one-step, one-spell range, and drew his athame.

“We’re no longer students, so be gentle.”

“Droll. What’s it been, two years?” Garland was clearly looking forward to this.

Meanwhile, as Pete—like every student here—gulped at the sight, Albright whispered, “A match between masters. Watch and learn, Pete Reston.”

“Yeah…”

“Though you may not catch much of it.”

“That’s just mean!”

But even as he protested, the teachers sprang into action. It started surprisingly slow, but with each clash, their strikes grew faster, harder. Soon the air between them was filled with sparks. No longer able to follow the flow of battle with his eyes, Pete forgot to breathe.

“…?! …?! ……?!”

“I figured you weren’t there yet. Don’t worry, I’ll—”

“I’ll explain, Pete.”

Before Albright could deliver a word of exposition, he was interrupted. He turned to find Oliver standing on Pete’s other side.

“He’s in my hands right now.”

“When you’re directly instructing him, yes. Doesn’t apply to observation.”

“Bullshit logic. Shut up and let me handle this.”

Albright grabbed Pete’s shoulder and pulled, but Oliver grabbed the other one, and leaned in, whispering in his ear.

“Pete, don’t try and see *all* of it. Just break down what you *can* see. First, what stances are they using?”

This query forced Pete to focus his attention. Both teachers were moving too fast to see, but he could just about make out the gist of things based on their body language.

“…Lanoff mid?” he asked, not too sure. “And Rizett mid…I think.”

“Exactly. They’re both sticking to the fundamentals. Deliberately, so that we can compare and contrast. Nearly every technique they’re using is something we’ve been taught.”

“I-it is?”

And here Pete was, not following 80 percent of it. Not about to let his charge get stolen away, Albright took a turn, pulling the bespectacled boy’s shoulder his way.

“Watch Instructor McFarlane’s footwork. Constant pressure, crushing the gap, never lets his opponent make a lateral move. The fundamentals of Rizett positioning. Keep your opponent where your strengths lie, and the scales of victory will tilt toward you.”

“But don’t miss Instructor Garland’s response. It might look like he’s trapped in defensive mode, but he’s squeezing in well-timed counters to keep his opponent from dominating. Withstanding the onslaught, and when the flurry dies down and the pressure eases, he seizes the chance. A lunge forward when his opponent steps back—”

“Um, uh, so…”

“Oh, do calm down,” Chela said. “You’re making Pete’s head spin.”

Too much information from both sides at once. Chela's intervention silenced both Oliver and Albright, but by this time, the faculty match was wrapping up. They'd exchanged a hundred blows in mere minutes, never leaving that one-step, one-spell distance.

Theodore dropped his stance, sighing. "You ought to let your elders shine a *little*, Luther."

"Oh, please." Garland chuckled. "I have never once even considered holding back against you."

His athame sheathed, the ringlet instructor's gaze raked the student audience.

"Did that help at all? Then I'll be taking my leave. Farewell, Chela, my darling child."

"Yes, yes, I know, just go."

He blew her a kiss, and she rolled her eyes. Theodore sauntered away looking thoroughly pleased, and Garland wasted no time getting the students paired up for another match.

Screaming and crying might be a first-year's job, but the later years had their share of trials, too. The only difference—a year of practice and training made it that much harder to reduce them to tears.

"You all came back! Heh. I've got a *fun* one for you today!"

Vanessa Aldiss licked her lips, seeing her magical biology students looking that much sturdier than the year before. There was a fenced-off area behind her, with a number of strange foal-sized creatures within. Wings and heads were like birds of prey, but the sinewy muscles and bone structure of their lower halves were clearly feline.

Katie took one look at them and whispered, "Griffins."

"Babies. Hatched a month ago. Wings have grown in, and they're just starting to look like the real thing."

These griffins were far too imposing to call *babies*, but Vanessa was clearly in a particularly good mood today.

"Your task is to train 'em. Turn 'em into animals that do what mages say," she said, turning toward the enclosure. "Don't care how you do it, but it ain't gonna be easy. In their natural environment, these things are king of the magical ecosystem. They feed on everything else. They don't have it in 'em to bow their heads to other creatures."

She moved closer to the fence, and the nearest griffin chomped down on her shoulder. The students gasped, but Vanessa just grinned, not even trying to pry the beak off.

"Ha, see? They got spirit. Wouldn't be worth training 'em otherwise!"

Her right arm bulged unnaturally, then transformed into a set of giant claws. She wrapped this bulk round the griffin's neck, hauling it bodily into the air. Its limbs thrashed helplessly, and it let out an earsplitting shriek.

"C'mon, show yer belly. Wag your damn tail at me. Or *else*."

The griffin might not understand words, but that was all it took; the moment Vanessa grabbed the creature, it was clear who was stronger. The

griffin went limp, demonstrating it was unwilling to resist, and wagged its tail, pleading for mercy. Once she saw that, Vanessa released her prey. The griffin hit the ground and fled to the far side of the enclosure.

"That's basically it. Prove you're stronger, make 'em submit. That's how you make livestock outta wild beasts," she said, turning back to the students. "If you blow it, they'll kill ya. And since I can't watch out for all of you at once, we've got some upperclassmen here to help. Come on down!"

The older students who'd been waiting at the back stepped forward to answer her call. Twenty-odd students in years four through seven, and Katie spotted a familiar face among them.

"Ms. Miligan!" she said, her face lighting up.

"Hello, everyone. I knew this class would be Katie's personal hell and decided I should swing by for moral support."

As Miligan reached Katie's side, Chela spoke up.

"Thank you," she said. "I didn't see this ending well."

Once each student team had an upperclassman in tow, a sixth-year girl raised her white wand high.

"Okay, okay! Eyes here! There are several ways to tame a magical beast, but fundamentally, it all comes down to the carrot and the stick. And at this stage, the stick is most important. Right now, these griffins think you're all jokes."

As she spoke, she opened the gate and led a griffin out. All second-year eyes on her, she faced the fledging griffin down. Vanessa getting bitten was fresh in their minds; they were stressing this far more than the sixth-year.

"Pain is a good way to sap their desire to fight, but if you wound them, then you've gotta waste time healing it. That's where pain spells come in. Manavian physiques aren't that different from humans, so once you get the hang of it, it's easy. You there! Sit."

She waved her wand, barking orders at the griffin. It turned its head, contemptuous. It obviously knew what she wanted but had no intention of obeying.

"Ignore me, huh? Fine. **Dolor.**"

Clearly exactly what she expected, the girl wasted no time casting a spell. Light left her wand, and when it reached the griffin, the beast shuddered.

"KYOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

The griffin let out a shrill cry, writhing on the ground. Katie clenched her fists. Next to her, Oliver was starting to sweat, afraid she'd jump in to stop it.

"See? In the words of sadly missing Instructor Darius, pain is the great leveler, affecting sages and fools alike. Give them an order, and if they resist or ignore you, that's where a pain spell comes in. Rinse and repeat until they reluctantly start to listen. Then you bring in the carrot. Give them the meat they like and shower them in praise."

She pointed at the trays of raw meat lying on a nearby worktable.

Vanessa grabbed a hunk and took a bite—or rather, swallowed it whole. “Let me remind you, a griffin egg ain’t gonna go for less than two million belc. Nowhere but Kimberly are you gonna get these in class. Once they’re grown, it’s nigh impossible to tame ’em, and if your attempts here fail, the money spent on ’em gets flushed right down the drain. They’re gonna end up as snacks to go with my booze.”

That added a new layer of pressure. Pleased by the tense looks, she sat down on the worktable, swinging her legs.

“Do your worst. I’m happy to eat ’em for you, but you don’t want us sending a sky-high bill to your folks, do you? Begin!”

Not even giving them time to collect themselves, the assignment began. Like throwing them into the wild. As the other teams started working, Oliver and his friends exchanged looks.

“……What now?”

“…I’m sure it’s useless to ask, but is the method we just saw—?”

“Don’t. You. Dare!” Katie didn’t even let him finish.

Chela patted her shoulders. “I rather thought so. But we can’t just ignore the assignment. Our team will have to find a means of completing it without the use of pain spells.”

“Heh-heh-heh. That’s where the fruits of our research come in!” Miligan said, smiling. Her eyes caught Katie’s. “Interspecies communication studies. An academic discipline specifically created for just this situation. Isn’t that right, Katie?”

“Absolutely, Ms. Miligan!”

These two were clearly on the same page here, while the others were rather taken aback.

“Listen close,” the Snake-Eyed Witch said. “There is some individual variance, but pain spell training has a nasty side effect—it makes the target hate you. Since time immemorial, accidents have been caused when the beast’s emotions burst forth! However! If you apply the interspecies communication principle of mutual understanding, it is possible to forge relationships with magical beings at a much more elevated level! As we will soon prove.”

While she spoke, she approached the fence and used her white wand to lead a griffin out. She brought it over to the others and spoke again.

“To forge a positive connection, you begin by getting to know each other! This, I have already done! I know everything there is to know about griffins—how they eat and live, what environments they prefer, where their organs lie, and where to stab if I need to kill them in a single blow! Fear not, griffin! I am your greatest advocate!”

Oliver nearly pointed out the flaws in this logic, but he saw the same look on Katie’s face and held his tongue. An upperclassman was attempting to help them. No reason to be a wet blanket.

“Sadly, griffins lack language. But they are social creatures and have concepts of friendship and cooperation! As I will now demonstrate. **Plumare!**”

Casting off her robe, Miligan enchanted herself. Griffin-like feathers sprouted from her shoulders and arms, and a large beak formed on her face. She crossed her new wings in front of that beak.

“Putting your wings together like so is an in-group signal that you are *not* hostile! Rather than forcing our ways on them, we adapt to theirs! This humility is the greatest achievement of interspecies communication studies! Those accustomed to existing training techniques may well find it roundabout, but observe! The beast is already less wary!”

Keeping a close eye on the griffin through her feathers, Miligan snapped her beak together, calling to it. Oliver took a good look at the griffin; it *did* seem to be slightly less openly hostile. But it was hard to tell if it had actually registered the friendly overture or was simply confused.

“Now for the second phase! Having established that we two griffins do not mean each other harm, we take the next step, rubbing our beaks together in a gesture of friendship! Accomplishing this means we’re as good as BFFs!”

Slowly, yet with total confidence, Miligan approached the fledgling. She leaned forward, pointing her beak toward it like a human reaching out for a handshake. The crowd watching gulped. After a moment, the griffin moved its beak next to hers…

“KYOOOOOOOOOO!”

…and screamed right in her ear. Blood gushed out of both Miligan’s ears, and she collapsed in a heap.

“Mil—”

“Ms. Miligan—?!”

Guy and Katie both yelped, and the friends raced over to her, using their athames to keep the griffin at bay as they pulled her to safety.

“Ha-ha-ha, it got me good!” Miligan cried, not the least bit discouraged. “A close-range sound wave attack! Mm? Sorry, Katie, I can’t make out a word you’re saying. And was the sky always this purple?”

“Both drums and the inner ears are damaged!”

“Possible cerebral hemorrhaging! Heal her quick!”

Oliver and Chela were already treating her injuries. Meanwhile, the other groups were going back to their own assignments, clearly deeming this outcome inevitable. Vanessa was doubled over laughing. That was extremely grating, but given what had just happened, Oliver was disinclined to protest.

“…My turn.”

Katie stood up, leaving Miligan’s side. Guy heard what she’d said, blinked a second, then realized what it meant. He grabbed her wrist.

“Wha—?! Have you lost your mind? I can’t let you! You saw how it turned out!”

“So what?! Interspecies communication isn’t easy! Of course it’s not going to work the first time!”

Katie shook Guy off. He started to follow her, but Oliver grabbed his shoulder. Nothing they said would stop her now.

“Hello, griffin,” she said. “My name’s Katie Aalto. Would you like to be friends with me?”

She left a few steps between her and the fledgling, speaking softly to it. The griffin answered with a shake of its wings—and the wind elementals dwelling within them created a strong wind, rejecting Katie, pushing her

away. Given the creature's age, the force was not substantial—but this was the same ability the garuda had.

"…Mm, sorry, let me rephrase," Katie said. "We *will* be friends. Whether you like it or not."

Even with the wind buffeting her, Katie did not yield a single step. Her voice did not waver. A pang shot through Oliver's heart. She could not have said this last year. This was a *mage's* strength—an arrogance indistinguishable from madness.

"KYOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

She stepped forward, pushing against the gale, and was hit with the same sound attack that had downed Miligan. The shrill echoes ringing in his ears, Guy went pale—Katie was directly within the attack's line of fire.

"I will defend myself. I'm not making you my slave, but neither am I your food," Katie told the fledgling. "Throw anything you want at me. Attack till you're satisfied. I'll face it with everything I've got!"

She took another step closer. The manavian retreated a step, unnerved.

"Hmph." Vanessa snorted from across the room. "Trying new things ain't bad, little lady Aalto. But if you can't wrap this up before time runs out, your whole team fails with you. You really think this is gonna work?"

Harsh truths to lay on anyone striving for an ideal. Katie heard them loud and clear, her fists balling up.

Without glancing over her shoulder, she asked her five friends, "…How long will you give me?"

She requested more time: as much as this classroom period allowed her.

"Be honest with me. You all know I'm not doing this because I want to—I just don't want to let this poor thing die."

Any griffins that failed to be tamed were eliminated. Since Katie was the one rejecting the most successful approach, this griffin's fate lay on *her* shoulders. As much as it hurt to do so, she had to draw the line. She was painfully aware that her own shortcomings left her unable to guarantee the survival of the life before her eyes.

Fully aware of what she was going through, Chela and Oliver glanced at each other.

"…Leave us half an hour. That'll be enough, right?"

"…Yeah," Oliver said. "With that much time, we can get the minimal training in."

They looked at Guy and Pete, who both nodded. Trusting their decision.

Grateful for her friends' trust, Katie focused her heart and soul on the trial before her.

"Thank you. Till then, I've gotta try."

Time passed…but no miracles occurred.

"…Haah…haah…!"

Katie was breathing heavily, the feathers on her shoulders torn up by the griffin's fierce resistance; countless scrapes and scratches riddled her body, and her throat was parched from the number of spells she'd cast. She'd

tried sounds, gestures, expressions, mana waves—every means of communication *except* violence, and they'd all been flicked aside.

"……"

Oliver had seen this coming. This was far more difficult than the rapport Nanao had built with the demon ape on the labyrinth's second layer, on their way to rescue Pete. All *she'd* had to do was prove they meant no harm—Katie, on the other hand, had to make *friends*. And the griffin had no interest, making the task virtually impossible.

"…Yo, should we?"

"No. Let her have the full time."

There wasn't much of that left. Guy was nearing the end of his rope, but Oliver was stubbornly holding him back. If Katie's shoulders had betrayed the slightest sign of defeat, he wouldn't be, but…

"Look close, Guy. This is Katie's fight. She's up against reality as we know it—always has been, always will be."

She never gave up. Even now, she was so focused on the griffin's motions she'd forgotten the pain she was in. She observed each move it made, searching for a way to earn its trust. Oliver couldn't stand to stop her. Any mage would respect Katie's efforts.

But the time Katie had was finite. Chela glanced down at her pocket watch again and called it.

"Time's up, Katie… I'm sorry."

"…Nn…!"

Her shoulders shook. Chela stepped forward and put her hands on them.

"You did your best," she said. "Step back. And feel free to cover your ears if you want."

"No! I don't want to!" Katie rasped. Large tears streamed down her cheeks. "This little one's fate is *my* fault. I won't just turn my back on it… Not ever…!"

She *still* had her eyes locked on the griffin, not budging an inch. And if she'd made her choice, no one would argue with it. Chela and Oliver gritted their teeth and took a step toward the manavian.

"…Huh?" Katie squeaked.

A pale finger had brushed the tears from her face.

"You're sweet…"

A gentle voice in her ears made Katie turn. An older girl stood behind her, both arms around Katie. Pale-blond hair and a soft smile that made Katie's heart melt.

"*You're* here?" Oliver said, surprised to see his sister.

Shannon Sherwood smiled at him. As she did, the solemn sounds of a stringed instrument rang out. Recognizing that timbre, Oliver wheeled toward it—and found an older boy playing a viola with a modified white wand.

"Both of you…?!"

Gwyn Sherwood glanced once at his brother but said not a word, letting his instrument speak for him. Mana-laced sounds filled the room, and everyone sharing that space couldn't help but listen. Not just the people—even the griffins, who'd likely never heard music before, stopped in their tracks, feeling the melody wash over them.

"This girl is trying…to save you."

As the music played, Shannon walked quietly toward the griffin, not even drawing her wand. She didn't hesitate to stroke its beak, speaking softly to it as if she were cajoling a small child.

"…Mm… Mm… Good griffin… Now you. Come join us."

Shannon turned, beckoning Katie to her. Thoroughly confused, the curly-haired girl stepped up to the manavian.

"Try…asking for something," Shannon urged. "I know…it'll listen."

Strangely, Katie didn't doubt her. She nodded and gestured.

"Can you…spread your wings wide for me?"

She demonstrated, holding her own arms all the way out. It stared at her for a good long moment—and then there was a gust of wind, and the manavian's wings unfurled. Katie gulped.

"It obeyed her," Gwyn said. "The assignment's complete."

The viola stopped.

Vanessa had been watching in silence, but now she jumped down off the worktable, stomping over.

"Wait a goddamn minute! You need to butt the hell out, Sherwoods! You did the whole assignment for 'em! This is a *second-year* class, y'know!"

"All we contributed was a performance to soothe its nerves and the final mediation. Well within the range of permissible support, Ms. Aldiss."

Gwyn's tone was peaceful, but he wasn't backing down. Vanessa scowled at him…only to start laughing.

"…Ha! I get it. If I can't explain *what* you did, then I can shut my pie hole—is that it?"

The magical biology teacher was referring to an unwritten Kimberly rule. No one, not even a teacher, could argue with the results of a spell they could not understand. If she wanted to overturn the results of the Sherwoods' interference, she'd first have to uncover the trick behind it.

"Fair enough. Okay, you get a passing grade today. But there's more griffin training to come. Here's hoping you didn't just delay the inevitable."

And with that, the bell rang. The students began leading their griffins back into the pen, and Oliver breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't expected his cousins to bail him out in public.

"Er, um…! Thank you!" Katie said, running over before they could leave. Shannon and Gwyn turned back to find her cheeks flushed. "Can I ask… what you did? You…connected to it—emotionally—right?"

She was looking from the griffin to the Sherwoods and back again. Shannon smiled uncomfortably.

"…My sister's not great at explanations," Gwyn said, "so let me. Eighty percent of that was *your* doing, Ms. Aalto. Shannon just added a little push. We can't tell you exactly how, and even if we did—you couldn't copy it. It's something only she can do."

He was very firm, and Katie had nothing else to say. The pair turned to leave.

"You're walking a thorny path," Gwyn added. "But it *does* lead somewhere. That's all we can really tell you."

With their morning classes over, the six friends gathered for lunch in the Fellowship, but they didn't chatter much that day—because Katie inhaled her oatmeal.

"Done! Going to see the griffin! Later!"

Wiping her lips on her napkin, she jumped up and ran off toward the exit. She'd managed to negotiate permission to train the griffin outside of class time, and the rest of lunch break was going to be spent furthering her connection to the creature. The rest of the group wished her luck.

"…I'll be in the library," Pete said upon finishing a light meal.

He often left early to hit up the stacks, but today there was a surprise turn of events. Guy shoved the last of his toast in his mouth and ran after him.

"Yo, wait up, Pete. I'm coming with."

"You *are*?!" Pete gaped at him. The other three were equally shocked. Seeing eight eyes on him, Guy looked deeply uncomfortable.

"D-don't act like I grew another head! I read sometimes! Walker mentioned a survival book I should check out."

That explained it. Everyone knew Guy was a learn-by-doing type, but maybe what the Survivor was teaching him had started to change that. Like Pete and Katie, Guy was always trying to improve.

Perhaps spurred by his motivated demeanor, Nanao put her fork down and rose to her feet.

"The pursuit of letters is a valuable discipline. Allow me to join you gentlemen."

"Of all people…," Pete grumbled. "I mean, fine, but we're really just going to read! If you nod off in there, the librarians get *pissed*."

"Don't worry, already been through it. Didn't need to sic a hoolibook on me, though…"

Guy rubbed the back of his head, remembering the pain. Nanao caught up and glanced back toward the table.

"Oliver, Chela, will you not join us?"

"Mm…"

Oliver made to rise, but Chela spoke first.

"Nanao, you go on ahead. We'll catch up in ten."

He sat back down. Nanao nodded and turned to go. When the three of them had left the room, Chela spoke again.

"I hope I wasn't being too presumptuous. But I felt we should speak."

This was clearly something serious—and Oliver had an idea what.

"…This about Instructor Theodore?"

"…I'm afraid so. Today was bad enough, but the Galatea incident cannot be overlooked."

She was referring to the time her father had manipulated Nanao into fighting a back-alley slasher. Oliver had told her about that immediately. Reflecting again on the events of that night, Oliver went right to the question at the heart of it.

"What is it he wants from Nanao? That's what I have to know. I can tell he's got high hopes for her but not where those lead. He brought her here from Yamatsu, is training her as a mage…to what end?"

"Honestly, I can't begin to fathom it myself. He's always been an enigma, and that side of him is especially strong where Nanao is concerned. Having said that—call it a daughter's intuition, perhaps, but something is telling me this is no ordinary obsession."

Oliver folded his arms, considering this.

Chela swirled the liquid in her teacup, adding, "And when a mage of his skills grows obsessed, it is a powerful curse. I can promise you it's not mere malice, but…that is hardly a comfort."

"Yeah… Frankly, Miligan was never particularly malicious, either."

And she'd still kidnapped Katie. Oliver nodded. He knew that much himself. Malicious or not, a mage's actions could easily be life-threatening.

"At the very least, it's not related to any McFarlane sorcery. I think. If it was—as his heir, I would be able to fathom it, perceive its nature. I suspect this is something else… A fixation derived from his personal affairs."

"…A personal fixation?"

And if that was how his own daughter saw things, the man's motives were even murkier. If only they had a clue—but as Oliver drifted into thought, Chela shifted to another topic.

"Have you heard the name Chloe Halford?"

And for Oliver… Well, that was one of the most unnerving questions he'd heard at Kimberly.

He forgot to breathe. His pulse skyrocketed; his mana grew agitated. In the blink of an eye, he forced it all back to normal and answered.

"…I've heard stories. She's one of our most famous graduates."

"Indeed. Chloe Two-Blade, said to be the strongest Gnostic Hunter we've ever had."

Chela was nodding. Didn't look like he'd aroused her suspicions. That was a relief. Her eyes had been on her hands, not him. He didn't know where she was going with this, but it seemed safe to assume she wasn't trying to gauge his reactions.

"I met her once, when I was very young."

That sent further echoes rippling through Oliver. He'd known Theodore McFarlane was in the same year at Kimberly as his mother, but…to the point where he'd introduced her to his daughter?

“She was a friend of my father’s, apparently. I remember they seemed very close. She wasn’t…like anyone I’d met, in a way that’s hard to describe.”

Chela pulled herself out of the memory, changing tacks.

“The broom Nanao matched with—she’s named it Amatsukaze, but… you’re aware it once belonged to Chloe Halford? It returned to Kimberly on its own, not long after her death.”

He was aware. More than anyone else. Had her broom been in her hand that night—that was a thought he kept coming back to. And it begged the question—why had his mother been broomless in a situation that dire?

“I’m sure you’re aware of this as well, but Chloe Halford’s death is the subject of many sinister rumors.”

“……Mm.”

“She was a flag bearer for civil rights groups. I’ve heard she never once identified herself as one of them, but between her character and actions, it was only natural that people treated her as such. And with her history as a legendary Gnostic Hunter—well, I’m sure she had no end of enemies or allies.”

At this point, Oliver raised a hand, cutting her off. This was ill-advised. Talking about her was a taboo at this school.

“…Considering where we are, perhaps that’s enough.”

“I appreciate the concern. But…some things must not be swept under the rug,” Chela said. “If my memory serves correctly, my father’s demeanor changed greatly around the time of Ms. Halford’s death.”

She was keeping one foot firmly in that no-fly zone. Oliver gulped. Chela had chosen to make this statement in public—at least partly as an attempt to rein her father in.

“He’s always been prone to his excursions. But their frequency increased dramatically. Like he was driven by something. And soon, no distance was too great for those excursions of his.”

“……”

“Yet, as his classroom visit today suggested, lately he’s stuck to countries within the Union. And most of those were missions ordered by the school itself. His wanderlust is clearly diminished… And I trust you know what that means.”

“…Because he already found Nanao.”

This point had not been lost on him. Conscious of the ears around them, Oliver put it in words.

“Instructor Theodore’s fixation with Nanao is related to Chloe Halford’s death. Is that what you’re saying?”

Chela’s silence signaled agreement. She took a sip of her long-since-cold tea.

“…Mere conjecture, of course,” she said. “But no mage would be wise to ignore their intuition. Regardless of whether I’m right, I felt you should hear it.”

Oliver nodded, saying nothing. If Chela herself chose to voice the theory, then it wasn’t one he could afford to dismiss.

“…Right,” he said. “Nanao isn’t the kind of person who can act naturally while sounding someone out. We’ll have to handle that for her.”

“Precisely. My father saved her life on the battlefield, and she feels indebted to him. If—and I do mean if—he intends to use her for some purpose of his own, she will likely go along with that *willingly*. That is her nature.”

For a moment, Chela’s eyes swam with sadness. But then they took on a steely quality, and she caught his gaze.

“And that’s why we must protect her. My father isn’t the kind of man who’ll spill the beans at his daughter’s behest, but I am still heir to the main McFarlane line. I do have a voice. And I will stake my pride on ensuring he does not have his way with Nanao.”

Protecting her friend even from her own father. Her words a vow. Warmth rose up within Oliver, and he found himself smiling at her.

“Thank you, Chela. I’ll keep an eye on her myself. I’ll make sure we’ll be able to notice if Instructor Theodore starts meddling with her. And I’ll make sure she hears what she needs to.”

“I should be thanking you. This is a matter that by all rights should be handled within the family. Yet, here you both are, mixed up in it. I assure you, I’m suitably chagrined.”

Ashamed of her own shortcomings, Chela bit her lip, eyes downcast. Oliver knew this was a product of her perfectionist nature—he had to shake his head.

“That’s hardly fair, Chela.”

“Oh?”

“You know perfectly well an issue affecting any member of the Sword Roses affects us all. Yet, you always try to draw a line when something’s bothering you. Our friendship keeps us on equal footing, so that’s simply unfair.”

He smiled ruefully.

“If anyone else was in trouble, you’d help. Even if you had to force it. Even if they rejected it.”

This statement made her turn bright red, all the way to the ears. Belatedly, Oliver realized his blunder. Any mention of forced intervention from him would naturally remind her of what had happened in the Lily of the Valley on their weekend in Galatea.

“…I have no words,” she managed.

“Wait, Chela! Don’t…go *there*. That wasn’t what I—”

She had her head all the way down now. Oliver tried to salvage things—but there were at least two pairs of eyes on them: Chela's half sister, Stacy Cornwallis, and her servant, Fay Willock.

"…Clearly, *something* happened between them."

"Curious?" Fay asked.

"No!" Stacy snapped, stabbing her pear tart with a fork. But even as she ate, her eyes never left her sister's face.

Fay sighed. As always, he was convinced being honest with herself would make things far easier for Stacy, but he had long since discovered saying that aloud would get him nowhere.

The last class of the day was astronomy. Like curses, this was a new subject for second-years, and it was the first class on the topic for Oliver and his friends.

As the bell rang, a man in his prime appeared, clad in old-fashioned, baggy robes. Even as he stepped through the door, he was giving orders.

"Open your books to page eight."

Drawing his white wand, he walked straight past the podium to the blackboard, quickly filling it with manascript.

"Er, um…," a student said, raising a hand. "Will we be skipping the class rundown and introductions?"

The man at the board went perfectly still. Like the words were a new concept to him.

"Rundown… Introductions… Oh, right. You do need those," he said. "Pardon me, I spend most of my time in the library, and it makes it hard to keep my bearings."

He swung around, sighing. Eyes glowing with boundless intellect swept over the students.

"I am Demitrio Aristides, and I teach astronomy," he said solemnly. "Let me offer a word of caution—when you address me, use a name. Doesn't matter which. But if you simply say *Instructor*, I won't perceive that as a term of address."

Quite a thing to lead with; the students were already looking baffled. Oliver took this as a discrepancy in cognitive density—mages with particularly vast knowledge stores often had difficulty communicating with those less informed, and this man seemed to be one of those.

"As for the core concepts of astronomy, the term itself means 'the laws of the stars.' We read the positions of the celestial bodies and estimate their influence on the world, predicting events to come. It is an extremely urgent and practical science."

This last line was extra forceful. But Demitrio didn't even pause to let it sink in.

"Why is observing the stars such a pressing matter? I doubt you need that explained, but as it is fundamental to the conceit, I shall do so: Because every little light in the night sky is a world distinct from our own—a tír."

Here, Demitrio chanted a spell and waved his wand at the classroom ceiling. The room went dark, and countless stars appeared above the astonished students' heads. Those armed with prior knowledge recognized their placements—this was a planetarium, accurately mimicking the night sky.

"What is a tír? It is a world that operates on different principles and physics than our own. They have different environments and ecosystems, perhaps even cultures born of different intelligence. And many of them are controlled by the god of that tír. Like the ancient kings ruled over lands in human history."

The stars above their heads shone in many different colors, the sight every bit as beautiful as it was bewitching. There was a compelling force to it, one the heart found hard to resist. Every student gulped. That feeling was *not wrong in the slightest*.

"Meanwhile, the world we live in has no god. In astronomical terms, we call this an atheosphere. Rights of dominion over atheospheres are divided; thus, we mages came to exist. In other words, the art we call magic was originally the authority invested in a god." He went on. "Looked at another way, it is what remains of the god this world once had. We rebelled against its control, slew god with our own hands, and robbed it of its authority. This happened fifty thousand years ago, before the development of our current civilization. Thus, the age of divinity ended, and the dawn of our modern-day magical world arrived."

Having reached the dawn of history, Demitrio paused. And beneath the bewitching gleam of the stars, one student's hand shot up.

"May I ask a question, Instructor Aristides?"

"I'll allow it. Ask away, Katie Aalto."

The curly-haired girl stood up in the darkness. She spent several seconds choosing her words.

"…I've heard the rebellion against god was carried out by a band of all demi species that existed at the time. And that the heart of it was a species long since extinct, known as the progenitor demis."

"That is the prevailing theory. What of it?"

"Why were we unable to stay united?"

A very direct question, and he answered without a trace of hesitation.

"Flip your question, Katie Aalto. Ask not why they couldn't stay united but how they were able to come together in the first place. The answer—they shared a common enemy in god. In the face of an overwhelming threat, all other conflicts cease to matter. That led to the ancient alliance, a battle for their very survival—but the moment their common foe was slain, the alliance splintered. Simple, really."

Indeed, it was so simple it left Katie speechless. Demitrio's theory held that conflict was the default state of being. Unable to argue with that stance, she clenched her jaw in frustration. Essentially, he had implied that

her ceaseless quest for interspecies harmony was but another survival strategy.

“Another popular theory is the impressive leadership by the progenitor demis you mentioned. They do seem to have excelled at bridging the gaps between different life-forms. We believe they were every bit as intelligent as humans, elves, dwarves, and centaurs. We will go into this in detail later, but while the god still controlled our world, these five progenitor demis were what we call clergy species, serving under that god. Anything further would be outside the domain of astronomy. Study your magical history, Katie Aalto.”

“…I will. Thank you.”

Hardly pleased with what she’d heard, she nonetheless thanked him and sat down.

Demitrio waved his white wand again, and the stars began to change. Complex shifts in their positions, dim little stars growing brighter, and big bright stars growing dim.

“Every star in the sky is a glimpse of a tír, but the locations relative to this world vary per star. Generally speaking, the brighter the star, the closer the range. Here that word refers not to physical distance but the composite difficultly of passage between the two worlds. Every tír is on a constant cycle, drawing closer to our world and then moving farther away again.” He then added, “I can’t imagine anyone here is unaware of this, but the sun and moon are not tírs. Those two objects were placed in the sky by god during the creation of the world. They are a part of *this* world. So they have no direct bearing on the subject at hand.”

He waggled his wand at the false sky again, extinguishing the light of the moon. The sun had never been there to begin with, so all remaining stars were tír.

“Our concern lies with these other stars—countless other worlds with fundamentally different life-forms born of alien gods. Eight of these are on a consistent cycle that brings them into direct contact with our world. These are our primary threat. Specifically:

“Marcurius, the Fragrant Water’s Shore.

“Venasgorn, the Brooding Golden Mountains.

“Luftmarz, the Ravaging Inferno’s Kiln.

“Hadiaiupitre, the Imperious Green Garden.

“Ganosatun, the Beast’s Terrain.

“Uranischegar, the Judgmental Heavens.

“Ayrioneptu, the Rotting Sea’s Shoals.

“And Vanato, the Chthonic Retreat.”

He rattled off this list of bizarre names and forged ahead into the next phase of his lecture.

“The first threat these offer is the occasional migration of tír creatures. Invasions from entirely discrete ecosystems cause major damage to local ones. This sort of disruption occurs between our own world’s ecosystems as

well, but assume the results are far more dramatic," Demitrio explained. "But I should say that modern magical ecosystems have occasionally thrived despite these invasions. Several of the magical creatures you know are descended from tír ancestors. These successful invaders often fill a key niche within the resulting ecosystem, so it would be a mistake to assume all such migrations are dire. There are entire fields of research studying the potential benefits therein."

Oliver could see Katie's arms folded, her lips pursed. She had boundless love for all creatures from slugs to behemoths, but she had never come in direct contact with any migrations. She had enough on her plate facing the magical ecosystems of this world; how could she find room to add in lives from outside that framework? She'd yet to make up her mind.

"Depending on what migrates, that alone can cause disasters; but if we observe them carefully, determine their natures, and deal with them appropriately, we can minimize casualties. The act of coming from their world to ours means they can't make full use of their powers. Essentially, a random monster popping over is unlikely to end the world. The problem lies with the things that join the migrations with intent and purpose. Scouts for the tír gods—we call them apostles. We can afford no mistakes handling *them*."

Demitrio was sounding grimmer by the minute. The whole class knew *this* was the meat of the subject.

"What do these apostles do here? Exactly what it sounds like. They spread the word. They teach people about the gods of their world, preach the allure of their control, and gather followers to their cause. The specific approaches vary by the apostle's characteristics and the nature of the god they serve, but there is a tendency to target species of higher intelligence. Smarter creatures are more likely to be unhappy with their lot in life and are more susceptible to religious persuasions. This creates intelligent species that worship tír gods. And naturally, in our world, humans and several types of demis are prime targets."

The stars wheeling overhead began flashing, as if each had a mind of its own, calling out to the students, begging them to cross over.

"Alien teachings wind their way into their minds, reducing them to pawns of these tír gods. We call these beings—Gnostics."

A silence settled over the room. The stars' tumult had subsided, and the false sky was calm again. The astronomy teacher's soft voice echoed once more amid the darkness.

"No matter which god they serve, the ultimate goal of every Gnostic is the same. Summon the god they worship here. Destroy the order and dominion of our world and remake it according to the unnatural rules of the god's tír. Whatever the outcome, to us it is pure devastation. Thus," he continued, "we must stop them. Without compromise or concession, every Gnostic must be pruned. Allowing them to proliferate spells this world's

doom. We have come this close to succumbing to such threats more times than I have fingers on my hands."

As Demitrio put it, the history of mages was the history of Gnostic wars. From ancient times to the modern day, the battles raged on.

"The direct extermination missions are carried out by the elite Gnostic Hunters you're familiar with. Teams composed of mages who excel at combat are out there protecting our world this very minute. I've been on my share of missions and have seen more than my fair share of hell. Each fight I survived left countless comrades' bodies piled behind—a sight some of you will likely witness for yourselves one day."

They all knew that time was not that far off. Gnostic hunting was a major post-graduation career path.

"The battle against Gnostics is a duty to every citizen of this world—not just the hunters. To prevail in combat, you must know your enemy. This is why I teach astronomy. Which tír will be within range when, and what kind of threats does it bring? Obtaining this knowledge now will directly prepare you to resist the Gnostic threat," he said before finishing with "And that's what this class is all about. Any questions?"

Demitrio waved his white wand again, returning the afternoon light to the classroom. The stars twinkling above were snuffed out. But every student present knew full well they were still up there, staring down at them.

After a moment's thought, Pete raised his hand.

"…If I may, Instructor Aristides?"

Demitrio flicked his gaze upon him. "You may speak, Pete Reston."

"Thank you. I guess what I don't understand is…why do these people think it's a good idea to summon tír gods?"

Given the lecture so far, that seemed like a key thing to ask. Once again, the astronomy teacher had the answer ready.

"Their hearts are weak. They are unable to accept that this world is the way it should be."

"…He's different from the other teachers, somehow," Guy said in the hall after class.

The others had formed similar impressions.

"He seemed very conscious of a mage's responsibilities," Chela said, nodding. "Given his experiences on Gnostic Hunter missions, perhaps it's only natural."

"But he's hardly the only one," Oliver added. "Most of the Kimberly faculty have served on the front lines. And that's definitely had a big impact on the way this school does things."

Kimberly's brutal curriculum meant it was often derided as a Gnostic Hunter vocational school. While there was some variation, anyone who survived their time here *did* learn how to fight.

As the group chatted, they reached an intersection, and Chela paused.

"…Well, then. Ms. Miligan asked Katie to meet up before dinner, and I wanted to thank her for the griffin help, so I'll be joining them. Anyone else coming?"

"…Yeah, I'm in."

"Oh? Really, Guy? I thought you had a Labyrinth Gourmet Club meeting?"

"No big deal if I miss *one*. And you're gonna check out the griffin again before you eat, right?"

"Yes, but… Wait, are you worried?" Katie asked.

"Uh, yeah?" Guy said, exasperated. "When am I *not* worried about you?"

Katie made a face. "Sorry," she said.

Oliver smiled at the sight, and Nanao suddenly tugged his arm.

"Then Oliver and I must show ourselves at the broomriding arena."

"Oh? Me too?"

"Naturally. A rider and her catcher are inseparable."

She had both hands on his sleeve and was not letting go. Oliver gave up the fight and let himself be dragged away. Katie's trio turned left, and Oliver and Nanao glanced straight ahead—and then back at Pete, the odd man out. The bespectacled boy shrugged and turned right.

"I've got plans of my own. I won't be around for dinner."

"Okay, then, Pete. See you back at our room tonight."

Each went their separate ways. But three minutes later, Oliver suddenly stopped.

"Wait… *Where* was Pete going?"

Nanao blinked at him. "? I rather assumed the library."

"That's in the other direction. It'd be much faster if he joined us. I could see Guy or Katie making a wrong turn, but Pete practically *lives* at the library."

He mulled it over. Maybe he was overthinking this. There were plenty of things Pete might need to do other than visit the library. But things that would keep him from dinner? Something he was sure would last that long?

"…It's bugging me. Sorry, Nanao!"

"Mm!"

She asked for no explanation. Both turned and raced back. They reached the intersection and took the right-hand turn after Pete. Oliver drew his white wand and the tip glowed, reacting to the scent of Pete's uniform—the same method he'd used to track Katie when Miligan had kidnapped her.

"…This way."

It led him in a classroom door—and just as he'd feared, he found Pete looking up in surprise—and the mad old man with him.

"Oh? Some unexpected guests!"

"Wh-what are you guys doing here?"

"…Instructor Enrico," Oliver whispered.

Even today, the magical engineering teacher had subjected his students to whatever terrors he saw fit. That same man—Enrico Forghieri—stood by

Pete's side, a painting of a lake before them—a well-known labyrinth entrance. They'd been about to dive in.

"As promised in class before, I am about to show Mr. Reston my laboratory. Did you have pressing business with him?"

Enrico's question forced Oliver to think a second. How best to handle the man?

He decided the direct approach was the right one. He straightened up and replied, "If I may be so bold—could we attend this laboratory visit as well?"

"Huh? No, wait, what?" Pete spluttered.

"Please," Oliver said, speaking over him.

He couldn't let the mad old man get Pete alone. Within the school building was one thing, but in Enrico's personal workshop? Even if there was no direct physical threat, this laboratory was without a doubt home to all manner of *unspeakable horrors*.

"Hmm… Hmm…… Hmm?"

Enrico was tilting his head from one side to the other, eyeing Oliver with great curiosity. Even with glasses on, his gaze was making the boy's skin crawl. That cheery gleam to his eye was more terrifying than any beast Oliver had fought. It made him feel like a fragile toy about to be picked up by a rambunctious child.

"I have only invited Mr. Reston…but I will admit you both did quite well in the last class. Your conquest of the liquid golem was magnificent!" Enrico nodded. "Very well! In honor of your achievements, I shall give you a *chance*."

Grinning, he spun around—and nabbed Pete bodily beneath one arm. Pete yelped, but by then he was already halfway inside the painting.

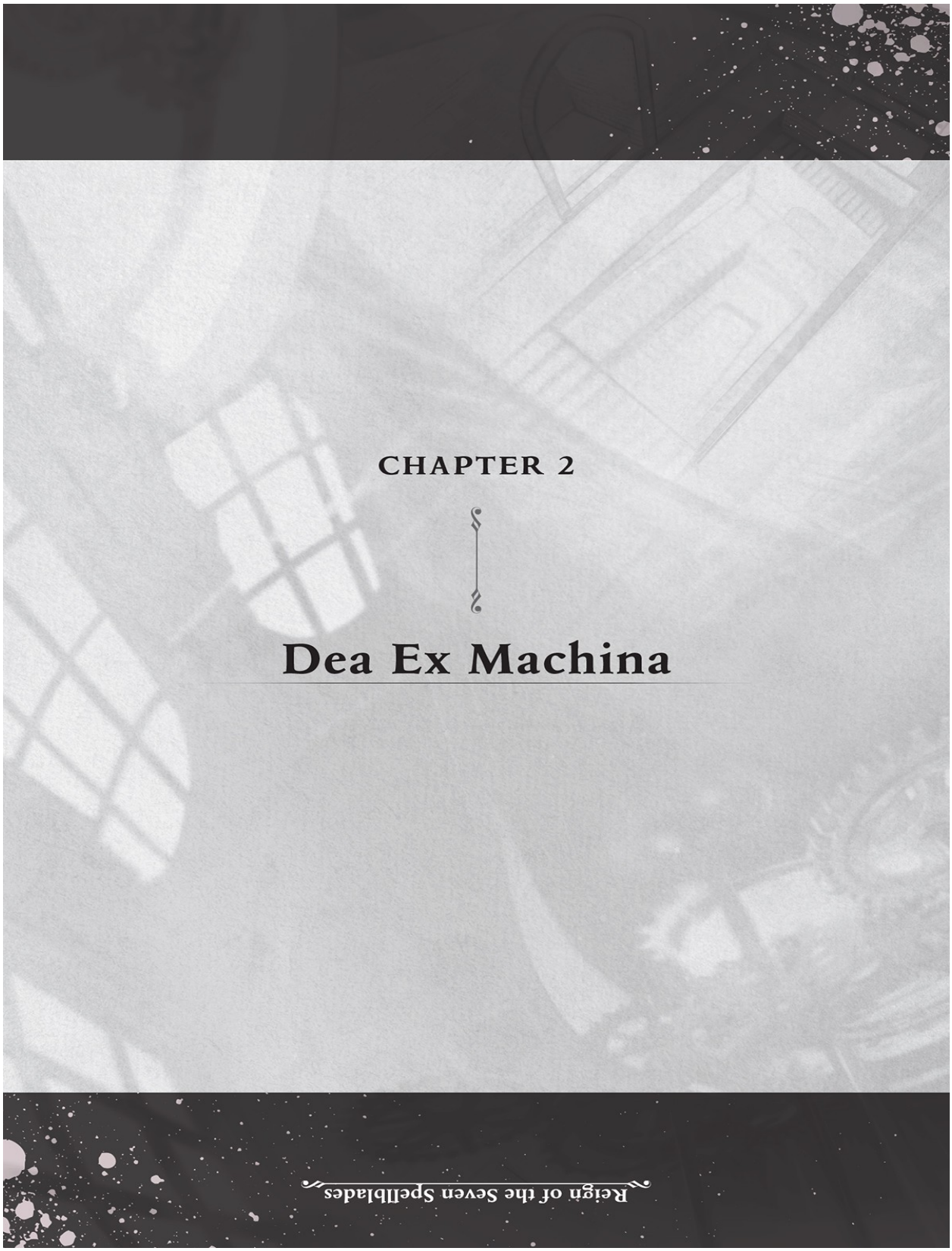
"You may join us—if you can *keep up*! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

With a peal of laughter, Enrico left the classroom for the labyrinth. Oliver drew his athame.

"After them, Nanao!"

"On it!"

The Azian girl matched his stride. The two of them plunged into the labyrinth in pursuit of the mad old man.



CHAPTER 2

Dea Ex Machina

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As unhinged as Kimberly was, the students had invented many activities befitting that madness.

Labyrinth trail running was one of these. As the name implied, runners competed to see who could dive into the labyrinth and get back fastest. Reserved for experienced upperclassmen explorers, it had enough of a following that there were official rankings for the run times. It was a perilous discipline, testing knowledge of the labyrinth's construction, capacity for maintaining velocity, and ability to handle any traps or monsters encountered on the way.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Tch…!"

"Hng—!"

To pursue the mad old man, Oliver and Nanao faced a remarkably similar ordeal. The labyrinth required caution—at times, a detailed survey before each and every step. Yet, they were forced to bulldoze through it all, handling threats with estimation and improvisation. Any mistake could result in loss of limbs.

"Clypeus!"

Oliver's spell created a temporary covering on the titles ahead, preventing the pressure-trigger trap from activating as they passed. A year's experience was only *just* enough for him to handle it in time. But despite all the time saved, they were gaining no ground on Enrico—even though *he* had Pete under one arm.

"Aieeee!"

"Kya-ha-ha-ha! There's more where that came from! **Extruditor!**"

If one party could stop a trap activating, the opposite was also true. The old man's spell hit a vast swath of floor, and an array of spikes shot upward. Oliver frowned. Too far to jump, and neither of them had brooms.

"We can do this, right, Nanao?"

"Verily!"

A moment later—with no break in stride—they moved to the walls on their respective sides, running on surfaces nigh perpendicular to the floor.

"Oh, you've mastered Wall Walk? At your age?" Enrico cried, glancing back. "Most impressive! But I'm not done yet! How's this? Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

This time, his spell hit the ceiling. As he passed, it cracked open, and something massive fell into the passage—a sphere, so big it filled a good 80

percent of the space—rolling right toward them. The same ball golem that had wreaked havoc on their class.

“Nanao, melt the floor!” Oliver barked.

There might be no room to run, but they’d already learned how to handle this thing: Turn the floor up ahead into a quagmire. With their combined magic output, they could pull that off in time.

But it was not to be. Heedless of Oliver’s plan, the Azian girl had shot forward toward the ball golem.

“Nanao?!”

“Duck, Oliver!”

He did as he was told, watching as Nanao caught the ball golem with both arms. As she did, she dropped her center of gravity and slid under the golem, then used that leverage to hurl it backward. The golem’s bulk sailed over Oliver’s head.

Trapped under Enrico’s arm, Pete gaped back at the spectacle.

“She…*threw* it?!”

“Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! Your friend is something else! Never seen anyone handle it that way!”

Enrico’s laughter echoed down the corridor. Oliver and Nanao resumed their pursuit, his jaw hanging open, her rolling her shoulders.

“Hibiya-style yielding art: Sack Toss. That golem lacked the weight to flatten me— Ow!”

Oliver had smacked her upside the head. “That was nuts!” he yelled. “There had to be a better way!”

Nanao just grinned at him. “Certainly! But I’m positively bursting at the seams!”

As they ran, Enrico’s spell rearranged the blocks of the floor and walls, forming a new golem that blocked the breadth of the passage. Faced with these new impediments, Nanao did not slow down—indeed, she sped up. Not even reaching for her blade, she struck the golem with her shoulder, knocking aside the blocks mid-assembly, and speeding right on by. Oliver scrambled to keep up, astonished.

“You tackled a golem to pieces?!” Enrico howled. “Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! You’re blowing my mind! How do you have such powerful mana circulation at your age?!”

“…Ngh…!”

Oliver flinched, hands clenching up. Like the mad old man said, that maneuver was only feasible because of Nanao’s unique physicality. Same with the ball golem toss. And there was no need for such feats of strength—Oliver could easily think of smarter, less risky methods to handle those situations, and Nanao was well aware of that.

Yet, she had *chosen* to go for broke. The reason—well, given her own words just now and the gleam in her eyes, she was clearly just *that* worked up. Nanao had spent a year studying at Kimberly, and her own magic was aching for an outlet. For a chance to show off what she could do.

“Excellent! Let’s kick it up a notch! Do try not to die, children!”

Enrico raised his white wand high, chanting. There was a beat—then a powerful vibration struck them from below. The floor, walls, and ceiling—every rock around was moving, shifting. The path itself was changing and expanding.

“Mm? The passage is writhing?” Nanao said, eyes wide.

It was like being inside the belly of a snake. As they both scrambled to avoid getting caught up in the chaos, Oliver gritted his teeth, realizing what this was.

“A cave golem! The whole corridor…!”

In just over a minute, the transformation was complete. Before them lay a massive tube of a corridor, some twenty yards in diameter—less a hall than a *tunnel*.

The wall and ceiling were no longer distinguishable—and there was movement all around. Like fresh sprouts at the advent of spring, the landscape itself was deploying countless golems in traps, everywhere the eyes could see.

“…Ah—!”

Meanwhile, as most students headed toward the Fellowship for supper, four first-years were still in a lounge. One of their number—Teresa Carste—jumped, as if she’d just woken up.

“T-Teresa?” Rita Appleton said. They were seated side by side. “What’s up?”

“…Nothing,” Teresa replied, rubbing her eyes. “I may have briefly passed out. From boredom.”

Dean Travers spun around, white wand in hand. He’d been staring down a tank of mud.

“Oh?! Well, *sorry* we’re not providing you enough entertainment!”

“D-Dean, relax,” Peter Cornish said, trying to keep the peace. “I don’t think she meant—”

“No, I did.” Teresa was having none of that, though. “This is objectively extremely dull. Why are we even here?”

Dean looked ready to burst a blood vessel, and Peter had to physically hold him back.

“Now, now, Teresa, don’t be like that,” he said. “Both of us are really struggling with spellology. Just hold out a bit longer till we get it.”

“I already told you how. What are you even stuck on? This is elementary hardening magic. You have soft mud, and you make it hard! That’s all there is to it.”

“Rrgh…!”

Dean reeled backward, groaning. He was the one who couldn’t pull this spell off, which meant he was in no place to retort. Feeling sorry for him, Rita clapped her hands, as if trying to clear the air.

“Let’s take a deep breath. Teresa’s right; we need to figure out what’s got you stuck. Dean, how are you picturing it?”

“Uh…like, all this goopy stuff goes *bwaaam* and then *ka-chunk*…”

“That means nothing,” said Teresa. “Try using your big boy words.”

“I’m not *stupid*!”

“Uh, Dean’s more the intuitive type…”

Teresa wasn’t actively trying to start things, but Dean always got riled up anyway, and this kept them from getting anywhere. But just as Rita and Peter were looking thoroughly defeated, someone else joined them.

“Ha-ha, love the energy. What’s going on?”

They all turned and found a pair of second-years they’d met at the entrance ceremony party.

“Mr. Greenwood, Ms. Aalto… H-hello!”

“Hee-hee, hello. We saw you struggling and came on over. Spell practice?”

Katie glanced at the wand in Dean’s hand, then at the tank of mud.

“N-nah,” he said, looking shifty—not wanting to admit he had a problem. “It’s nothing…”

“It’s not nothing, Dean. Uh, we’re struggling with hardening spells,” Peter said, well aware that Katie and Guy had already worked it out. He explained the issue at hand.

“Mm-hmm. I getcha,” said Guy. “Dean.”

“Y-yeah?”

“Lighten up, man! I promise we ain’t exactly star students, either.”

He clapped Dean on the shoulder. Guy had a real knack for closing the gap like that. Forcing people to relax.

“But what you just said did give me one idea: I think you’re gettin’ this mixed up with freezing magic.”

“…I am?”

“It’s how you’re picturing it. The way you put things, it sounds more like you’re trying to freeze the mud. I did the same thing, so…”

Dean blinked a few times, then looked at the tank. “Is that…wrong…?” he muttered.

“Totally wrong. Freezing mud just gives you hard mud. But with hardening magic, you’ve gotta make *rocks*. So you need to be picturing getting the water *out*. Put that in your head and give it another shot.”

Guy gave Dean a slap on the back. With that advice in mind, the younger boy turned back to the tank. He spent a minute solidifying his mental image, then waved his wand, chanting the spell. The mud in the tank rose up, leaving a pool of water around it.

“Hey, you got it!” Guy said, grinning. “That was much better. See? You got skills.”

“I-it’s still wrong!”

“Not at all. You did just what I said and got the water out.”

Guy pointed at the tank, but Dean looked confused.

“You made dry earth from wet mud,” Katie explained. “Next, you’ll need to figure out how to make that more like stone. In other words, you split the

concept into steps. Any time you're first studying a new kind of magic, this kind of breakdown can really help."

"A friend of ours said, 'If you just take it one step at a time, you can learn any spell in your textbook.' And that's really helped us keep up with the rest of the class."

They looked proud—and the younger kids took that as a sign of their faith in this friend.

Seeing Dean with his arms folded, thinking, Guy put his arm around the boy's shoulder.

"Tell you what—hang with us for another fifteen minutes. Peter, you too. And anyone else who's getting variable results. More advice from that friend: The key to magic is *knowing* the result. If your concept is hazy, it'll come back to haunt you."

He glanced at Rita and Teresa. There was a brief silence, then Rita raised her hand.

"…Um…may I join in…?"

"Mm? Rita, really? You were having no trouble in class…"

"I—I totally was! It was awful! Cruddy rocks that made me wanna cry!"

"Urgh…"

The harsher Rita was on herself, the more it hurt Dean—who hadn't even managed that much. Guy grinned and started walking them through it.

As Katie watched from a step back, the last first-year came over to her.

"Looks like Guy's got it covered… Are you all right, though, Ms. Carste?"

"…I was never stuck," Teresa said, a tad grumpy.

Katie's smile didn't waver for a second. "Oh, aren't you accomplished! Good girl!"

Her friendliness made Teresa uncomfortable, but she'd come over to ask a question.

"…How did you know?"

"Mm?"

"…What they were stuck on. I couldn't begin to work it out."

This had been bothering her. She hadn't been trying to wind Dean up earlier. She just…couldn't figure out what else to say.

Katie folded her arms, thinking about that one.

"Lots of reasons, but…I guess the biggest thing is to listen carefully. Look right at them, consider their position and how they're feeling."

"…Even if you aren't interested in them?"

"You aren't?" Katie asked, blinking.

Teresa simply nodded. Katie winced a little. Too honest.

"I wouldn't be in a rush to dismiss him," Katie said gently. "You've only just met. And you don't *really* know any of them yet, right?"

"……"

"I think it's fun being around different people and learning to understand one another."

Katie shot her a grin. Teresa found this hard to believe, but…Katie clearly wasn't lying or spouting platitudes. Confused, Teresa looked away… and saw Dean practicing. He'd taken Guy's advice to heart and tried for the umpteenth time—and Rita and Peter both burst into applause.

"Wow, you did it!"

"Awesome! Dean, you got it!"

"Hell yeahhhhhhhh!" He threw his hands up, roaring, then picked up the tank with both hands and lugged it over to Teresa. There was a small rock spike at the center of it, and he thrust it out in front of her. "See, Teresa! I did it!"

"…Uh, congratulations?"

"Mr. Greenwood showed me the trick! Next time, I'll get there first!"

"Ah. Good for you."

Her heart was clearly not in it. She had no idea why he was telling her all this. Frustrated by her disinterest, Dean was about to say something else, but Peter and Rita each grabbed an arm, dragging him away.

Katie watched this, laughing, then leaned in and whispered, "Looks like he's interested in *you*."

"…He's loud, obnoxious, and cringey." Teresa sighed.

She meant every word, but…at the same time, she thought, Oh—I couldn't figure out why he was always on my case, but…that would explain it.

To no one's surprise, Oliver and Nanao's pursuit of Enrico Forghieri had been a very long haul.

"…Hah…hah…hah…!"

"Haaah…!"

Golems scuttling across the ground like spiders, bounding on powerful legs like grasshoppers, or whizzing through the air on six high-speed wings. One new type after another, like an exhibition of miniature golems. Oliver and Nanao had been fending off these attacks while chasing the old man for a solid twenty minutes, with no end in sight.

"Not even a chance to catch our flagging breaths!"

"You still good to go, Nanao?"

"Naturally! My limbs are still attached."

Her tone was bright and reassuring, but Oliver was not inclined to underestimate the toll this was taking. Running out of stamina, sapping their reserve of mana, a momentary lapse of focus—and they'd be dead. And all three were diminishing by the second. How much longer could they last?

Oliver was running the math in the back of his mind. Then right in front of him, without warning—the cave golem's wall burst inward.

"_____?!"

The shards of wall were followed by hellacious fire. Oliver and Nanao drew up short just outside the burn radius. A few seconds later, the fire died down, and a man appeared, crushing carbonized blocks beneath his boots. Recognizing his height and grim countenance, Oliver gasped.

“Mm? Oh, you two! Thought I heard a ruckus through this wall!”

Alvin Godfrey, Kimberly sixth-year, student body president, and more commonly known as Purgatory. He caught sight of Oliver and Nanao, then quickly took in the rest of their surroundings.

“This is Instructor Enrico’s cave golem—what’s going on?”

“He’s got Pete, and we’re in pursuit! No time for details…!”

“That’s enough for me. Teacher pursuit? I’ve done my fair share of the same.”

Without further word, Godfrey peered ahead, down the tunnel. He saw Enrico’s figure getting farther away and a whole gaggle of golems pouring out of the walls, surrounding the three of them. Could they break free? Not at all sure, Oliver raised his athame.

“Still, you’re second-years, and this is clearly excessive. Allow me.”

Godfrey stepped ahead of Oliver’s aim, pointing his own athame dead ahead. Every golem in that direction flinched.

“Ignis.”

And *all* of them were vaporized by the ensuing inferno.

Flames belched forth, swallowing up golems, scorching traps, surging through the cave itself like a dam bursting. Despite their lead, Enrico and Pete were not quite out of range, and a gust of hot wind blasted their faces. Pete screamed.

“Aughhhhh?!”

“Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That cannon must be Mr. Godfrey! A surprise guest!”

Flames hot on his heels, the mad old man cackled as if this just gave him a thrill. Watching him go, Godfrey said, “I’ll burn you two a clear path. Run!”

He took his own advice, and they quickly gave chase. The president’s broad shoulders were a comfort, but Oliver was kicking himself.

“Sorry, sir,” he said. “We turn down your invite, and now—”

“Ha-ha, cut the guilty act! I’m the student body president! It’s my job to be there for everyone who needs me.”

Godfrey just laughed; he was clearly a man of his word. Oliver felt another pang of guilt but at the same time wondered: *How does he manage to stay so put together in this madhouse?*

Unaware of Oliver’s thoughts, Godfrey was fully focused on the golems ahead. Three multi-legged wrigglers, each the size of a warg, and a big troll-sized golem with two massive arms. The distance and angle prevented him from blasting away, so Oliver assumed he and Nanao would be handling the three smaller foes. But he was soon proven wrong—Godfrey dove directly into the center of the golems.

“Word of advice—don’t fight like I do.”

And with that, he kicked a small golem. Its leg broke like a twig, the tip of the claw stabbing into the main body. The force of the blow sent the golem crashing into a second small golem, then slammed both into the wall.

Oliver couldn’t stop himself from letting out a small gasp. They were small, but easily a hundred and fifty pounds each—yet Purgatory was treating them like pebbles.

Godfrey was already spinning, stomping the remaining small golem. By this time, the troll-sized golem had its long forelimbs on the ground, charging in on all fours. “Up the leg count” was a tried-and-true principle of large golems, a reliable way to alleviate the inherent sluggishness of their bulk. And this thing weighed enough to crush a man.

“Haaaaaaaaah!”

He dove in between the forelimbs, driving his heel into the exposed torso. There was a sound of metal bending, and the golem was in the air, unable to act. Its size and weight were its greatest weapons, and its design lacked contingencies for fighting while airborne.

“Impetus!”

Before it could land again, Godfrey fired a spell after it, finishing it off. The first kick alone had cracked the frame, and now a hurricane-force wind blasted it to pieces. Watching the fragments rain down, Oliver’s brow twitched. How would he even begin to copy this?

“Don’t stop! After him!”

Godfrey was running already. Oliver and Nanao came back to their senses and matched his stride. But up ahead, the next change was already in progress. As Enrico passed through, chunks of the tunnel slammed down—hefty metal bulkheads, blocking all progress.

“Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! They’re fireproof! Three firewalls! They ought to give even you some trouble, Mr. Godfrey!”

The old man’s voice echoed from beyond the metal. Oliver gulped. The doors were closing faster than they could run. And while they were breaking through the walls, Pete would be hauled out of reach.

“Sorry, but you’d need *five* of those, Instructor Enrico.”

But the young mage with him soon proved Oliver’s fears baseless. Godfrey raised his athame like he was up against easily breakable plywood.

“Calidi Ignis!”

Like a lance of concentrated fire, his spell cut through all three doors.

Melting metal, glowing red, holes punched at the base of the cave’s firewalls, big enough for several people to pass. As the trio ran toward them, Oliver could no longer conceal his shock. These doors had clearly been designed specifically to resist fire. But the mage named Alvin Godfrey had punched through them with one double incantation—all three walls at once!

Not long after the firewalls, the rounded cave walls gave way to an ordinary square passage, and there Godfrey turned on his heel.

“We’ve reached the end of the cave golem,” he said. “You can handle the rest. I wish you luck.”

Oliver nodded once, then added, “I’ll make it up to you.”

The student body president raised a hand in response and was off back up the cave. No sooner was he through the doors than there was a boom, and the area shook. Once more, he'd likely punched his way through the golem walls.

As they resumed their chase, Nanao said, "Oliver, the way he fights…"

"It's something else. No point even comparing ourselves to him right now."

He shuddered. It was hardly his first time seeing someone who totally outclassed him. But Salvadori and Rivermoore were first and foremost *uncanny*. Godfrey wasn't; the spells and techniques he used were all easily understood. They were just extraordinarily strong. So simple and overwhelming, there was nothing you could do against them.

"Can't face him if we lose them now. Let's move!"

"Aye!"

They made haste, Oliver doing his best to push aside the thoughts Godfrey's flames had seared into his mind. *Best just to be glad he's on our side. For now.*

As they proceeded down the passage, their surroundings shifted from ancient-looking stones to seamless walls and ceilings with a sinister elasticity to them. Oliver surmised that these must be some sort of magical alloy, but what qualities it might possess were a mystery to him. Perhaps Pete's knowledge in this field already surpassed his own.

"…What's that sound…?"

An unsettling noise, perhaps a vibration, echoed up from the corridor depths. Low, but powerful, like the steady beat of a massive drum. Unable to fathom what it might be, Oliver grew tense.

"You've made it! Mr. Godfrey may have provided an assist, but nonetheless—well done!"

And as they emerged from the end of the strange passage into a cavernous space, Enrico stood waiting for them, clapping. Pete was facedown on the ground next to him. The crystal lamps provided little light, and the corners of the room were shrouded in darkness. Resisting the urge to run to their friend's side, Oliver and Nanao approached the mad old man, careful of their surroundings.

"As promised, I shall allow you to join us. Have some candy and observe!"

He pulled two lollipops out of his pocket and tossed them over. Both took them largely out of obligation and slipped them inside their robes. As Oliver got closer, he could hear Pete hurling.

"Blarghhhhh!"

"Pete…!"

One eye firmly on the mad old man, Oliver moved to his friend, rubbing his back. His condition was no surprise. Enrico had been whisking him along at speeds even faster than Oliver and Nanao could manage, over

some very rough terrain. Arguably, their pursuit had made it worse, but he'd just have to make up for that later.

"This is no time for a relaxing vomit, Mr. Reston! If you pursue the path of sorcery, now is a time for drinking in everything your eyes can see."

Enrico flashed his pearly whites. As he did, multiple crystal lamps lit up, illuminating the space behind him. And what lay within it was so big Oliver immediately braced for combat.

"Observe! It is not yet complete, but this will be my masterpiece: the Dea Ex Machina!"

Countless tubes sprouting from the wall held in place a silent giant.

Bigger than a giant. Before even estimating any measurements, from where they stood it was impossible to see the totality of it. Oliver eyeballed it as at least fifty feet across and easily a hundred and fifty feet tall. Clearly impossible to categorize by the three standard golem sizes. He could tell it was humanoid in shape, and incomplete, lacking anything from the waist down. That meant the completed version would be at least *twice* as tall.

The torso was slimmer than the shoulders would suggest, yet there was a swelling at the breast, making it clear this was feminine in form. The facial features could be described as even and slightly infantile; the eyes looked ready to open. From the shoulders down, it was sheathed in resplendent dress-like armor, and—though it boggled the mind—the distinctive luster suggested the surface was entirely coated in adamant. The arms secured against the walls on each side were long and graceful, detailed even to the slender fingertips. Yet, those beautifully crafted hands could easily crush a man to death. Like an innocent child tearing the legs off an insect.

"…A giant humanoid golem…?" Oliver asked, staring up at it.

Enrico turned toward him. "You have questions? Ask away, Mr. Horn. You have earned the right to do so." He encouraged his pupil to speak.

This man's assignments were punishing, but he delighted in his students' initiative—for better or for worse, he was a *teacher*. Picking his words carefully, Oliver took advantage of that.

"…'The first dream of all, the first to be discarded.' In magical architecture, I've heard that's giant humanoid golems."

"Indeed it is."

"No matter how you construct them, they're impractical. First, how are you obtaining the incredible reserves of mana needed to move that bulk? Second, even if you do, what use is something so inefficient?"

"Precisely," Enrico said, thoroughly satisfied with the questions. He turned to face the golem behind him. "There are multiple problems here, and they're all woven together. Let me go through them one at a time. Mr. Reston, as a prerequisite—why is it golems have not replaced trolls or goblins in the field of manual labor?"

Realizing that question was for him, Pete forced his limp frame upright. Oliver almost reached out to help but thought better of it. His friend's eyes had plenty of light in them.

"…Versatility, ease of management, autonomy, and cost of creation. They have plenty of issues compared to demi-humans, but the single greatest one has to be—they aren't fuel-efficient," Pete answered. "A golem runs on five times the mana a troll of the same mass requires. And since they aren't alive, golems cannot generate their own mana. The upshot is that even accounting for problems specific to the living—food, waste, and dwellings—running golems is simply far more expensive than hiring demis."

"Right you are! A single kobold is a work of art created by nature, both in flesh and spirit. No mechanical reproduction of mana systems can hope to match the operational efficiency of even the lowest magical creature."

Oliver nodded. The magical industrial revolution had changed many things, but from a cost performance perspective, golems remained an inferior form of labor. Or rather—like Enrico said, living creatures were just that good. No mage had yet managed to construct a machine that even came close.

"And that is but half the reason the maximum realized golem size has remained constant. The supply of magic particles has thinned compared to days of yore, leaving even behemoths unable to live outside of very specific regions. If even the living face such restrictions, a golem of that size would struggle to wiggle a finger. In other words, oversized golems cannot even manage to be of any practical use until their mana efficiency matches that of a behemoth."

His rundown of seemingly insurmountable problems complete, the old man turned toward his students.

"So I found a new approach. Do you know the etymology of *golem*, Mr. Reston?"

Another pop quiz. The questions were all for Pete—clearly, the old man expected a lot from him. The bespectacled boy appreciated that fact and mobilized his wealth of knowledge in response.

"'A vessel for the soul made by god.' I've heard it originally applied to all living things, including humans… And following that practice, mages began constructing golems of their own."

Enrico's grin grew noticeably more sinister.

"Precisely. According to the original meaning, golems and living things are one and the same! In that sense, our own bodies are but *living* golems. Ones carrying the freight we call a soul." He then asked: "…Do you see where I'm going yet? After all—you three took my liquid golem apart."

At that, an idea entered Oliver's mind, unbidden. That strange sound echoing in his ears since they entered the approach passage. Like the rhythmic beating of a very large drum. But in light of what he'd just heard, it was more likely—

"…You mean…it's *alive*?"

He leaned back, peering at the face high above. Certain now he was hearing the golem's heartbeat.

A few seconds later, Pete caught up, the color draining from his visage.

Enrico flung out his arms in delight.

"A living golem!" he cried. "The concept itself has existed in theoretical terms, but there were several technical barriers preventing the development. Thus, it falls to me to complete the first of them!

"As you say, this is a golem made from the flesh of living things! The exterior may be coated in magical metals, but the interior is all flesh and blood! Harvested from many different creatures, cultivated, grown, and connected!

"Naturally, this is not the accomplishment of magical architecture alone. I was forced to cross-pollinate with magical biology and any number of other disciplines, obtaining the assistance of top-class researchers in each of those fields. Delightfully, I work at Kimberly, the one place in the world where that can be easily done."

Oliver was well aware the faculty here were all at the top of their fields, and their research was backed by top-of-the-line facilities and very generous budgets. But more than that—research done at Kimberly was largely free from outside interference.

In Oliver's mind, that was more terrifying than delightful, but it did mean a wide range of valuable information was concentrated here.

"…Clearly, a result that will go down in history," Oliver said, aiming for the minimal level of enthusiasm. "But if the goal is to make giant golems practical, then you're still only at square one. You've attempted to solve the need for massive mana generation by creating a massive living creature—and this method alone has clear limits. Even if you manage to create a magic medium with a capacity far greater than any that currently exist, the moment you surpass a certain size, the whole thing breaks down. If it was a first-rate mage's flesh, maybe, but just being alive will hardly be enough to overcome that limit. If the solution were that simple, it would've long since been solved." He paused. "And if that wasn't bad enough, these days behemoths can only function in singularly mana-rich environments. Even if you've matched their mana efficiency, the same limitation applies to this living golem. And if it can only operate under those limited conditions, it hardly qualifies as practical."

Rather than try to flatter the man, Oliver chose to list the obvious defects. He was sure that would please Enrico more than anything—and indeed, the mad old man was nodding happily.

"Absolutely. Thus, I required one more unorthodox step."

Here, his gaze turned to the silent girl by Oliver's side.

"Ms. Hibiya! What are the standard mana mediums used to propel golems?"

"I know not."

Nanao's blunt answer fell like cut bamboo, and the mad old man's shoulders slumped.

"…I am aware this field has little hold on your attention, but it is part of the standard mage education. Do *try* to remember, Ms. Hibiya."

"Mm, very well."

Nanao put on her best listening face. Recovering, Enrico turned to Pete, who answered for her.

"Jade, opal, and amethyst. Each imbued with mana."

"Thank you, Mr. Reston. Those are the three typically used. And none of those can function as the heart of a giant golem. Amethyst is the most expensive and can store the most mana, but even it has insufficient capacity. If I attempted to make a power source with it, the fuel tank would be several times larger than the golem itself." Enrico continued with: "So what I needed was a new tank. A veritable revolution in energy storage efficiency. Everyone with me so far?"

He raised his white wand high.

"Just as Mr. Horn suggested, simply preparing a bionic vessel solves nothing. It must be combined with *something else*. **Patentibus.**"

The spell set the walls around them into motion. Cracks appeared at regular intervals, sets of double doors sliding open. Behind these: cages. Iron bars containing eyes aglow with terror. All humanlike creatures, primarily kobolds and goblins.

"…D-demis…?" Pete gasped. "So many of them—"

The three students couldn't take their eyes off the sight. Soon the rustling of clothes and sounds of breathing gave way to screams.

"Help!"

"Please, let us out of here!"

They swung toward the voices and realized—it wasn't *all* demis. There were a few humans here, too. Treated just like the demis, clad in rags, desperately clinging to the bars and pleading for help.

"_____"

Nanao shifted her weight forward, ready to run toward them—but before she could, a powerful shock coursed through her.

"Gah—!"

"Nanao?!"

She was down, smoke pouring from her mouth. Oliver ran to her, furiously trying to process all this. Enrico had chanted no spell, and Nanao had been well outside the range of spatial magic. No signs of any golems or familiars, either. But she'd been hit hard enough to knock her down. And he had no idea how.

"Oh, deary me, Ms. Hibiya. I only permitted you to observe. I won't allow one iota of interference with my laboratory. Worse…" Enrico's tone grew reproachful. "…The instant you saw this, you moved to *save* them, did you not?"

Cradling Nanao's body, Oliver gulped at the intensity in the instructor's voice.

"That was hardly prudent. Unbefitting of a mage. The pursuit of sorcery lies outside the bounds of morality. I cannot abide the frivolous inclusion of such secular concerns. And you are not even a civil rights activist, are you? Do not disrupt a man's research on mere *impulse*."

But with the scolding complete, the smile returned to his lips.

"I knew a mage once! A real treasure. Not bound by sorcery, knew nothing of ethics. A witch who proclaimed that her feelings alone mattered, and she allowed nothing to sway them."

Oliver's heart nearly leaped out of his chest. That description could be only one person. This old man, too, saw his mother in Nanao. Just as he did.

"You remind me of her. Not physically—rather the nature of your soul," Enrico said. "And for that reason alone—just this once—I will spare you further penalty."

Nanao was out like a light and heard none of this—but Enrico had already turned his attention back to his machine goddess.

"There may be a few humans mixed into the *kindling* I've prepared, but no need to concern yourselves! They are all criminals. Let's get back on track, shall we?" Enrico pivoted. "What is a superior fuel? To ordinary folk, it might be dry wood, carefully fired charcoal, or perhaps clean oil. But nothing from that approach would power a giant golem. The energy to volume ratio is far too limited. Conversely—what about us mages? It varies by the individual, but our energy per volume is far better than any conventional fuel. Just look at Mr. Godfrey's output! In the upper echelons of sorcery, energy is not remotely constrained by physical volume."

That, Oliver understood. Like the mad old man said, Godfrey and mages of his ilk had incredible mana output. And the source of that was all too clear.

"So where is this vast energy stored? In the etheric body. Every living creature is composed of three components—the flesh, the etheric body, and the soul. Your mana reserves are in the ether. An immaterial accumulation of potential magic. Since it is intangible, it is not bound by your physical volume at all! By comparison, the reserve stored in the womb is but a trifle—however, reserves in the flesh are more readily and easily available. Making conscious use of the mana in your ether requires a high level of both talent and training. This is why Godfrey and I appear to have so much more mana capacity that any of you.

"Yet, at the same time, etheric body maintenance is heavily dependent on the physical flesh. Ghosts become such hollow beings because they have lost the framework of their bodies. It's like being flung naked into a blizzard. If they do not find shelter somewhere, they cannot continue to exist."

Though not as demanding as the soul, handling etheric bodies on their own was a tall order. This was why the magic world's research on the

subject had remained stagnant for so long. What Enrico had said so far was all common knowledge, but as he neared the meat of his speech, he grew visibly more excited.

“Once again, all magical creatures—not just mages—have a vast reserve of mana stored in their etheric bodies. I trust my explanation has allowed you to grasp that concept.”

Oliver said nothing, but Pete nodded. Enrico shot him a pleased grin.

“Excellent,” he said. “Then let’s make *use* of them.”

He snapped his fingers. And with that—the cages became a grisly sight. Every wall opened, and massive gears appeared, grinding through the prisoners within. Oliver’s eyes went wide, and all the blood drained from Pete’s face.

“First, let us rid ourselves of these fleshly obstacles. We only have need of the etheric bodies,” said Enrico. “The key here is to provide as much fear and pain as possible before they die. We’ll be using them to fuel a giant golem, so ideally, we want their ether infused with resentment. We want them lingering, not passing on the moment you turn your back.”

He seemed quite proud of all this. Meanwhile, the prisoners were being ground alive, and not one of the resulting bodies was recognizable. Soon, they were entirely replaced with hazy *things*, possessed of no clear outline. Realizing these were ghosts, Pete shivered.

“Etheric bodies with no flesh are fragile things. No matter how great the energy within, they have paltry few means to convert that to tangible phenomena. That is why resentful spirits congregate. Doing so makes them larger, stronger—with this many, they’re easily visible to the naked eye,” he continued. “Once they have gathered a sufficient number, they’ll next seek out a body. That which they have lost. The warmth of flesh and blood, that which they yearn for beyond all measure.”

The ghosts were pouring between the bars of the cage out into the space where they stood. Oliver raised his athame, on guard, but the ghosts’ attention was all on the living golem. They flocked toward the Dea Ex Machina, as if that was where they had always belonged.

“Fortunately, the perfect body is available! The extra-large golem I prepared for them. They have no choice! They’re sucked right in.”

Once all the ghosts were inside the golem, the half-finished bulk began to vibrate. Realizing what must be happening, Oliver shuddered.

“Kya-ha-ha!” Enrico cackled. “They’re in conflict! Large though the vessel may be, there are too many souls! Strife is unavoidable.”

The spirits battled for dominion over their container, but the struggle peaked in seconds, and the golem’s shaking soon subsided. Enrico nodded, pleased.

“No need for concern, naturally. They are creatures of resentment. With that emotion infusing their very beings, they naturally converge and merge, swirling together into one massive malediction! You’ve studied these in curse class, yes? A maelstrom is *this*, grown out of control!” he explained.

“That said, we can’t *see* the movement of the soul. There is next to no way to directly observe souls! Such a pity. Research on them lags far behind work on the flesh or the ether.”

The old man shrugged. Before him, the golem had gone still once more.

“Thanks to a shared resentment, all etheric bodies have fused. Preparations are complete. Injecting mana.”

At his word, massive tubes extended from the walls, connecting to the Dea Ex Machina’s frame. Vast quantities of mana poured in, received and stored by the fused etheric bodies of the dead prisoners.

“What do you think, children? This is my masterpiece.”

As he spoke, the living golem’s arms moved—a clear, conscious action. Most of it was bound in place, but the arms had broken free and reaching out. Their grudge against him not forgotten—the arms were clearly trying to grab the mad old man.

“As you can see—it *moves*. I’ll admit, the core mana efficiency is no higher than a behemoth’s. The key difference here is how the mana is used—specifically, I can take the reserves meant for prolonging life and burn them on short-term acts. This is merely a tool made from flesh. It need only move when I will it and otherwise slumbers in a state just functional enough to maintain itself. Rather like hibernating. In that state, the energy loss is far smaller than the behemoth could ever achieve. Organs like the digestive system and the brain go through energy like crazy, but my creation never had either!”

He was clearly thrilled to show it off. A living golem, fueled by the energy of a curse, a prime example of how the worst kinds of inventions are the simplest. Faced with this desecration of the sanctity of life, Oliver couldn’t keep his voice from shaking.

“…What…?”

“Mm?”

“…What is it even *for*?! Countless lives destroyed to make a giant toy move, but to what end?!”

He was unable to hide his disgust. And that made Enrico’s voice turn utterly lifeless.

“You know how many lives are lost each year in the war against Gnostics?” he asked.

They’d never heard his tone this still.

“Many. So very many. Precious talents, the loss of which is truly a waste. What they could have accomplished if they had simply managed to survive…”

His eyes were elsewhere, reminding Oliver—this man, too, had served on the front lines of the Gnostic hunt.

“The greatest losses occur when the heretics’ prayers bear fruit and call tír gods down upon our world. When that happens, we have no choice but to deem all sacrifice a necessity, throwing mages on the problem like

yesterday's bathwater. During my time in action, I saw three such incidents. And the helplessness and grief will never leave me."

He broke off, turning back toward the three students. He had never looked so grim.

"Lives must *never* be wasted. You agree with that, I'm sure."

These words, from the lips of a man who'd just ground innumerable people to death. The irony was unbearable. Yet, it allowed Oliver a fleeting glimpse of his intent. Of what had led the mage named Enrico Forghieri to this nightmarish invention.

"…So you use the lives of demis and criminals *first*…?" Oliver asked, seeking confirmation.

In the old man's madness, this slaughter had *not* been a waste. He would likely speak with pride, insisting that he had made effective use of the *resource* of finite lives. Feeling no trace of guilt—like a proper mage.

"Judging lives of lower value expendable is, of course, entirely correct. But in this case, you're not quite there yet," Enrico said. "The lives I wish to make use of—are those of the Gnostics themselves."

A grin of the utmost malevolence spread across his face. Oliver felt a chill run down his spine.

"Each time we process a Gnostic incident, we arrest countless believers. The demis and humans imprisoned here were but a few of those. To prevent further calamity and stop the spread of their faith, it is customary to quickly incinerate them—but in that, can they truly be said to have paid for their crimes?" Enrico answered his own question. "*Hardly*. That end is not remotely befitting the atrocities they have inflicted upon the world. We should and can make better use of them. Force them to fight their own gods!"

He spoke of weapons of war, fueled by the lives of those who caused it. This was the core concept of the machine goddess. Never doubting the revolutionary nature of his work, Enrico's voice rose higher and higher.

"To that end, I created this golem! What could be more magnificent?! With this in play, even the life of a lowly kobold becomes a valuable fuel source, serving the battle against the tír! The lives of Gnostics used to foil their eldritch gods! It's perfect! The ultimate in green energyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!"

His cry echoed through the chamber. All the while, the Dea Ex Machina struggled to reach him. Commanded by the curse within, the machine goddess was desperate to crush the old man who stood before it.

"Oh, that's quite enough. I just wanted to prove you could move. **Nutrientibus.**"

A single spell drained it of all mana, and the giant went still. Silence filled the hall. Oliver and Pete had nothing left to say. Enrico spun toward them.

"Well, Mr. Reston? Did that prove stimulating?"

"…Uh… Ah…"

“Moved beyond speech! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Faced with sights beyond mortal ken, humans cannot find words. Pete hailed from an ordinary home, and this observation had been his *most* extreme experience yet. Oliver quietly put his arms around the boy, trying to settle him down. And the old man took that as a sign.

“Very well! Let’s call that enough for today. Take the two of them back to your dorms, Mr. Horn. The golem will not bother you on your way home. And Ms. Hibiya will likely wake soon.”

“……”

He had no intention of lingering longer. He took Pete’s hand, hefted Nanao under one arm, and left the workshop behind. The old man’s voice rang against his back as he departed.

“Your overprotectiveness means nothing! Mr. Reston has already seen it all. The rest is *his* fight—whether that leads to acceptance or rejection.”

Oliver clenched his teeth. He turned to Pete at his side. What he saw were eyes glistening with tears, unable to process the reality of what he’d seen.

“…Let’s go, Pete,” he managed. The least he could do.

Shaken emotions would settle in time. Human hearts were made that way. But once it did, how would Pete Reston have changed? That fear preyed on Oliver’s mind.

CHAPTER 3

Ancient Records

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When Kimberly students become upperclassmen, several roadblocks lie in their way—and one of the biggest is entering the labyrinth's fourth layer.

"I've heard of precious few s-second-years making it down here. Even with help…they just g-get in the way. I didn't set foot down here until, I think…the end of my fourth year. And I got m-my arm melted off, so…it was m-memorable."

The third layer—the Miasma Marsh. Leaving tracks in the sticky mud, the gaunt young man beside Oliver spoke with a mild stutter. A sixth-year student by the name of Robert Dufourcq. One of the comrades who knew Oliver's hidden face, he always wore a gloomy smile.

"Yeah, I remember that! You went into the assignment insisting you only needed backup from the rear. If I hadn't stepped in, you'd have lost half your body, maybe even ended up with your name in the joint funeral two years ago."

The girl teasing him was another comrade, a seventh-year named Karlie Buckle who had short red hair and pierced ears. Her plain-spoken manner came across as friendly, but there was a dangerous gleam in her eyes that made her slightly unapproachable.

"C-can't argue th-there. But…y-you didn't get off any easier. You're scary enough without acid b-burning half your face off—"

"You wanna talk shit about my face, there'll be consequences."

Her hand had the back of Robert's head in a vise grip. Bones creaked. Oliver's cousin Gwyn coughed pointedly.

Karlie let go and flashed Oliver a smile.

"Sorry, Your Majesty. I'm a real loudmouth. Always have been! Can't stand being quiet. Go ahead and chide me for it; I don't mind. Hey, maybe I *should* be stressing this a bit more."

“…No need.”

Oliver shook his head, unable to think of any worthy reproach. He might be only in his second year, but with this mask on, he was their lord. If his vassals were distracted, upperclassmen or not, he was prepared to snap at them. But here?

“It’s a comfort. I’m not yet capable of joking on *this* layer.”

Karlie’s trash talk might include a knock against him, but she wasn’t letting her guard down. This was how she always acted—proof she knew how to handle the situation at hand.

“Hmph, least you admit it,” she replied with a snort. “But is that a virtue for a man in your position?”

“Karlie!” Gwyn snapped. She was a year older than him, but he was Oliver’s right hand. “Get off Noll’s back. And Robert, don’t just stand there! Stop her.”

Karlie shrugged this off, and Robert bobbed his head, glancing sideways at Oliver.

“S-sorry, Gwyn. B-but…I’d also like to talk to him. While I have the chance.”

They all had good reason for wanting to know Oliver better. And he was perfectly aware of this, hence why he hadn’t pushed them away.

“It’s fine,” Oliver said, waving his brother down. “Don’t worry about me, Gwyn.”

But just as things seemed settled, a girl caught up from behind, moving into the space between his comrades. Oliver blinked at his sister—Shannon Sherwood’s usual gentle smile was conspicuously absent.

“Heh-heh-heh, looks like *someone* disagrees,” Karlie jeered, not even trying to hide the look in her eyes: *Ain’t it nice to have your cousin protecting you, little lord?*

Oliver held his tongue, racking his brain over how best to handle her.

“…Don’t…be mean…to Noll!”

“I’m just messin’ with him. Did it seem mean?”

“…It did. Like…no answer he gives will please you.”

“Ah-ha-ha! Guess it was kinda obvious.”

Karlie doubled over laughing, not a trace of guilt. Palpable tension crackled between the two girls—but then strong vibrations rose up from the mud at their feet. Oliver was about to bark a warning when Karlie grabbed his collar and pulled him to one side.

“ _____ !”

And the moment he vacated the space, the ground burst. Spraying mud everywhere, a wyrm emerged, easily over ten yards long. One of the third layer’s biggest threats, they detected the vibrations of mages walking overhead and attacked from below. Sawlike teeth lined its ring-shaped maw, and it wheeled in the air, aimed for Oliver’s head, intent on capturing the prey it had just been denied.

“““Tonitrus!”””

Four spells cast in unison shot directly into that gaping maw. The creature’s long, thick body shook and went still—then flopped to the mud, blowing bubbles. Before Oliver could get his wits about him, Shannon was at his side. None of his comrades paid the least bit of attention to the downed foe.

“We’re almost out of the third layer,” Karlie said. “It’s about to get dicey. You ready for it, Your Majesty?”

“…Yeah.” Oliver nodded, not letting himself shudder. To the upperclassmen, that attack hadn’t even qualified as dicey, a point they’d made all too clear.

It was another twenty minutes before they reached the end of the marsh. Now in territory beyond where the Ophelia incident had taken him, Oliver came to a halt, a knot in his stomach. The shift in his surroundings was all too clear. The ground, walls, and ceiling were all made of shiny stone. He and his comrades were in an ellipsoid clearing the size of the campus arena, at the back of which lay double doors.

“…So this is…”

“The way to the fourth layer. Commonly called Library Plaza.”

Even as Karlie spoke, changes were unfolding before Oliver’s eyes. The space before the doors warped, and a black *thing* emerged. Like a bundle of pitch-black rags, it quickly took form, stabilizing as a gaunt figure over seven feet tall, its head hidden beneath that black cloth. It spoke not a word, but the mana radiating from it—nay, the aura of *death*—left Oliver’s hand scrabbling for his athame.

“…!”

“Relax! You won’t be fighting *that*. Not that the real foe is much of an improvement…”

Karlie patted his shoulders and then glanced back at the rest of their comrades.

“As planned, we’ll be handling tasks in threes. Me and Robert will keep the king safe. We still good with that, Sherwoods?”

“…N—”

“We are.”

Shannon started to object, but Gwyn cut her off, nodding in agreement. Oliver said nothing, but Gwyn’s interjection was greatly appreciated. He valued his sister’s concern, but he wouldn’t be much of a lord if he allowed only his family to protect him.

“I’ll be fine. You two look after Teresa.”

“…Noll…”

“Got it.”

Shannon still looked nervous, but Gwyn nodded grimly. Teresa simply watched everything, her eyes betraying no emotion. Oliver turned his back on them and joined the two older comrades, advancing to the center of the plaza.

“Looks like you got your wits about ya,” Karlie said. “But all kidding aside—do *not* step out in front of us.”

“Or rather, we won’t l-let you. If anyone’s d-dying here, it’ll be us f-first.”

Robert’s halting speech was accompanied by a gloomy smile. Oliver didn’t doubt him for a moment, but chose to respond as a lord should.

“Then I have but one thing to say: I have not granted either of you permission to die here.”

Those words came like a slap on their backs, and both his comrades grinned.

“Ha-ha! You got it.”

“F-fair warning. Let’s m-make this look easy.”

Karlie and Robert raised their athames. A moment later, a book appeared in the black-robed figure’s hands.

Spotting the cover, Karlie yelled, “Luck’s on our side! I’ve seen it before. Our assigned reading is *Baltro’s Memoirs*!”

Several dozen pages flew up from the book, cocooning the trio in a swirl of paper that instantly revamped their surroundings. Oliver could no longer see his cousins or Teresa.

“Ch-chapter eight, verse two! The G-Glynntoad Calamity!”

By the time Robert finished, they were elsewhere. Surrounded by rustic farmland. Ordinaries tilling the fields with hoes in hand, or milking cows—which Oliver found inherently unnerving. It was all far too dated, from the people’s clothes to the way they worked. This had to be over two hundred years ago—before the magical industrial revolution.

“S-surprised? J-just as it l-looks. P-part of the t-tome’s contents h-have been recreated.”

“Escape ain’t impossible, so it’s better than an aria in that respect. Except—this library’s pretty well stocked.”

Oliver was catching up. The view before him wasn’t real—it was sourced from the book. He knew not where or when this was, but—it was the stage of the calamity Robert had mentioned. And proof of that lay in how nobody around was aware of their presence.

“*Baltro’s Memoirs*, chapter eight, verse two—an account of a migration witnessed in the year 984. And the casualties it brought about.”

Even as she spoke, Karlie’s eyes were on the sky above. It wasn’t quite noon yet, and the weather was overcast—but at the center of those clouds was a dark, swirling vortex. The ordinaries around them spotted it, too, pointing and yelling.

“Here it comes. Watch close—*this* is the calamity the tír bring to our world.”

And a moment later, hundreds of *things* poured out of the vortex, falling toward the ground. They appeared to be short cylinders, seven feet in diameter—rusty gears or wheels. But as they slammed into the earth, they began spinning like ball golems—and causing devastation.

“Eek…?!”

“Aughhhhhh!”

Fields, homes, livestock, people; the wheel-like *things* made no distinctions, crushing all in their paths. The sight of their neighbors’ demise left the survivors screaming. Waves of fear rippled across the landscape. The wheels made no effort to pursue the fleeing humans, simply tracing elaborate geometric spirals from the outside in, flattening everything in their paths.

As the screams rang in his ears, Oliver fought the impulse to do something. The sights before him were but a recreation; this tragedy was long in the past. He knew this, but it ate at him.

“You see what they’re doing? That’s what we call indiscriminate feeding. Often seen in packs after an unplanned migration. They’ve found themselves in a whole new world and don’t know right from left, so they just try eating everything to see if it goes down. Plants or animals, animate or inanimate, no distinction. They just eat and puke till they find things that suit their fancy.”

Karlie’s lecture helped Oliver understand what he was witnessing. Those wheels were *alive*. When he looked closely, people, livestock, and dwellings alike were losing mass far beyond what could be explained by mere *crushing*. It boggled the mind, but it seemed these monsters fed by running things over. That was how the wheels ate and how they hunted.

They were utterly different from the creatures of this world. Even magical creatures had not evolved like this. These creatures must have hailed from a fundamentally different ecosystem, otherwise they never would have evolved to acquire these characteristics. Uninvited guests from a strange and terrible world—the essence of a migration.

“Uh-oh. They’re c-coming this way.”

Robert pointed. A wheel was rolling toward them. Karlie pointed her athame in its direction.

“Better take a look at this one. **Colligationem.**”

Her spell hit the wheel a few yards out, stopping it dead, like it was in the grip of an invisible hand. She’d forcibly restrained it with a binding spell.

“Okay, safe to inspect. The shape’s a doozy, but the actual physical construction is on the comprehensible side for migrations. Pack hunting ain’t too far-flung from the creatures we know and love, right?”

Karlie launched right into a lecture, maintaining the constraint. The mana output this required was no small feat. Impressed, Oliver focused on the tír creature before him, eyes poring over it. Robert was using his athame to dissect the wheel. Where he cut, gray fluid spilled out, revealing soft tissues beneath—likely organs. It really *was* alive.

“Casualties are pretty high even at this stage, but once they’ve locked onto their prey, they get far worse. Best to make the most of it. You know—while they’re still preoccupied.”

She finished off the restrained wheel and turned her eyes toward the indiscriminate feeders. Easy enough to handle on their own, but the assignment was to take out the whole pack.

“Going one at a time’ll take forever. But there’s a great way to handle foes like this. Robert, take ’em out.”

“A-alone? You could h-help, you know.”

He shook his head and stepped forward. He opened the front of his robe, revealing dozens of test tubes strapped beneath it. Each had a magical creature sealed within—radiating magical malevolence. He selected one—a type of fairy—and popped the lid.

“Satus sursum.”

The spell released the fairy from torpor, and it shook itself, hopped out of the tube, and flew off toward the migratory monsters. This behavior was mandated by the spell cast on it. But of course, a tiny fairy had no recourse against a mighty wheel. It was crushed and eaten—along with the curse it harbored.

The infected wheel’s behavior immediately changed. The precise coordination was gone, and it charged right at its own pack. The wheel it struck changed with it, the curse spreading like waves. The migrant monsters were now feeding on one another. Oliver shuddered, balling his fists tightly.

“Works like a charm!” Karlie said. “Cannibal curses are just the thing for close-knit packs.”

That was all it took for Oliver to catch on. This was how curses worked: use a creature harboring a curse as a medium to transfer the spell, feeding it to your target to infect them. And not just the target itself—contact with the infected host would spread that curse through the whole population. The wheels crashed into each other, splitting open, cracking, then collapsing.

“They’re going down fast! But don’t relax yet. The curse intensity ain’t dropping at all. That shit stacks each time they feed. The law of curse conservation! If we see this through to the bitter end…”

As the numbers dwindled, the fighting was getting more intense. Each slain fellow was multiplying the curse’s effects, concentrating them in the remaining wheels. A hundred wheels became fifty, fifty became twenty, and twenty became ten. Their clashes were ceaseless. At length, there were only two left, and they crashed head-on into each other—then only one remained, radiating an inky-black aura.

“You get one left, and it’s *stuffed*. And if you kill it, the curse leaks out. Normally, you’d catch it and break the curse, but this is just an ancient record, so we don’t need the follow-through. Curse effects in assignments are neatly handled by the library itself.”

Karlie cast a burst spell to get its attention. The last wheel rolled toward the noise, its inherent nature entirely overwritten by the curse, its cognitive functions reduced to the instinct to crush and eat anything that moved.

Oliver raised his athame. The sole survivor was twice the size of the others, and the curses it had absorbed made it far stronger. But…

"Now, now, hold your horses, Your Majesty."

Karlie waved him down, then stepped forward. Robert backed off, standing by Oliver's side. Yielding the stage to her.

"…Haaaaah…"

She took a long, deep breath. The closer this thing got, the more dangerous it was, but Karlie wasn't budging. The wheel bore down on her, its hostility palpable. Unable to bear it, Oliver cried out, "Karlie!"

"Extruditor!"

The moment he yelled, she'd finally swung her athame. Not to attack head-on, though; just as her target seemed about to hit, she'd struck a blow to its side—like a hook to the brow. The wheel creature was moving at top speed, powerless to resist a push from that angle. It rolled right past Karlie before toppling over onto its side. It spun uselessly, scattering dust, pebbles, and the blood of its own kind.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Just keep on spinning!"

Karlie pounced on it. She landed on the wheel's side, at the center axle—no matter how fast it spun, it could do nothing to her there. It shot out a bunch of spikes to protect its weakness, but she'd known that was coming, easily dodged, and stabbed her blade straight into the creature. She didn't even need to move her athame. With the blade held still, the wheel kept spinning, driven by instinct—and delivering a fatal wound via the same principle as a can opener.

"Bye-bye. **Impetus.**"

Once the lid was open, Karlie didn't hesitate. She pounded home a spell to finish it off. It was like a hammer of wind slamming into the wheel's insides, forcing the severed disc inward and crushing all the soft bits beyond. A moment later, bodily fluids squirted out in all directions.

"Okay, assignment complete," she said. "Mm? Your Majesty, did you call my name just now?"

Covered in gray fluid, Karlie turned back to Oliver, grinning. She was a grisly sight.

"N-nasty, right? Th-that's why they call her Bloody Karlie. She does the s-same shit to people, too."

"……"

Oliver had no words, but relief was winning out. They'd gotten through this without any injuries.

"We lucked into an easy assignment," Karlie said. "These can get real bad if the draw's against you."

Their surroundings were already fading, giving way to the big doors they started at. She glanced back at Gwyn's group, giving them a wave.

"Goin' on in! We'll show him around."

"We'll be right behind. Don't go too deep," Gwyn called.

Oliver's group moved on through the open doors. When all three were inside, the doors swung shut with a loud *clunk*. The rules precluded anyone from entering unless they completed an assignment, and the rest of Oliver's comrades would face a trial of their own. He'd just have to trust his cousins and wait.

"Welcome, Your Majesty," Karlie said, swinging round to face him, arms outstretched, "to a place no second-years ever tread—the labyrinth's fourth layer, the Library of the Depths."

Oliver swiveled his head; the view blew him away. A tower of bookshelves stretching skyward as far as the eye could see. Countless staircases ran this way and that across the void, and winged demis flew between.

"…Harpies…"

"They're the books' caretakers. Not hired by Kimberly—they've been living down here since before the labyrinth was even discovered. They can be a little temperamental, but they'll also serve as guides. When you come to return a book, you'll want to give it to them."

Karlie ran down the rules. Several harpies observed the trio, but they didn't seem hostile. This place was not a library merely in name.

As the three moved forward, carefully looking things over, a black-robed figure approached—the same type of being that had given them their assigned reading. When Oliver looked tense, Karlie leaned in.

"The things in black are the watchmen. Can you tell *what* they are?"

He felt the smirk in her voice. One figure passed, and he caught a glimpse inside the robes; his hair stood on end. There was a scythe in one hand and a skull with eyes of infinite blackness. A being he'd only read about in books.

"Reapers…!"

"H-hilarious, r-right? Almost nowhere else can you still see d-death seraphs. But here they are, on p-patrol." Robert stifled a hollow laugh.

In the age of god, seraphs had been sent out into the world, playing their part in the grand scheme. Reapers were but one type, responsible for maintaining order over life and death. It was said they still appeared if mages attempted to escape their mortality, but few had ever seen them. Though some held this was because the sight of a reaper ensured your death.

"Even we'd be sunk if we tried to fight them. Be on your best behavior. If you follow the rules, they won't bug you."

"…What kinds of rules, exactly?"

"Don't damage the books, remove them without permission, return them late, cause problems within the library itself, et cetera. The Survivor tried to cook in here once and nearly got himself killed. A real moron, that guy."

Karlie cackled. That definitely sounded like something Kevin Walker would do.

“Every book in here is one of those forbidden tomes. The bulk of them date from before the calendar began. To mages, a true treasure trove, but a mistake here—and the books’ll eat you. Don’t even dare treat this like an extension of the school’s library.”

Oliver nodded. He was certainly very interested, although reaching for a book would likely be perilous at this point.

When she was sure he properly understood the threat, Karlie took her broom off her back and hopped aboard.

“C’mon. Broom use isn’t forbidden, but if you go too fast, it’ll earn you some nasty glares.”

“A-are you good at l-low speeds? W-we could go tandem.”

A generous offer, but Oliver shook his head, mounting his own broom and taking off. He was certainly no match for Nanao’s maneuvering, but he’d had the basics drilled into him by now. He certainly didn’t need help flying slowly.

As he started to rise, he heard the doors close behind him. He spun toward them.

“…Someone just left?”

“An upperclassman here before us. Don’t worry, everyone hides their faces here. Even if someone sees, no one will think we’re out of place.”

Karlie seemed unperturbed. Oliver was less convinced, but he followed her and Robert’s lead.

Meanwhile, two layers up, a different trio were tackling the labyrinth’s giant tree.

“…! Hng…!”

Doing his best not to look down, Pete shimmied up the irminsul after Guy. The broom on his back had a lifeline attached, and they’d practiced casting deceleration spells in case they did fall, but that did nothing for the sheer terror of being a good hundred and fifty feet up. With his nonmagical background, Pete was especially terrified.

“Make it up here, and we can rest!” Guy called. “Think you can do it, Pete?”

“Of—of course I can!” the bespectacled boy said, summoning every ounce of tenacity he had. “This is…nothing…!”

He felt a hand on his back. Katie was bringing up the rear.

“Don’t force it, Pete. Your legs are getting wobbly. Let’s take a seat for a minute.”

Kind but firm. She and Guy had both spent more time down here than Pete and were playing support and leadership roles, respectively. When Pete still refused to rest, she quickly passed a rope, tying it to a protrusion on the tree.

“See? You’re secured and safe. Sit down.”

“…Urgh…”

She'd done all the work for him, and he was forced to take a seat next to her. While they caught their breath, Guy came back down. He looked Pete over and made a face.

"Got tuckered out halfway, huh? I told you the third marker was far enough for today."

"To hell with that," Pete insisted. "I'm not letting you get any further ahead."

Guy shrugged. "You spend every day drowning in books and still wanna keep up with us on labyrinth stuff? I applaud the determination, but it's too much."

"It's nowhere near enough. I can't stay a liability," Pete hissed, biting his lip.

Katie patted him on the back. "You don't want Oliver worrying about you, huh? I know how that feels."

"I—I didn't say—"

"Sure, sure, you didn't," Guy teased. "And you'll get out of breath again, so no more chatter."

Pete fell silent. Watching their surroundings closely, the group rested for another five minutes, then resumed their climb. Struggling with the steep slope, Pete grumbled, "Argh… If we could just use our brooms, we'd be over this in no time…"

"I'd love to, but see those things up above?"

Guy pointed, and Pete looked up. There were a few dozen bird wyverns wheeling overhead right above the three of them—hardly a coincidence.

"They'll attack the moment we leave the ground. I tried taking the easy route once, and it did *not* end well. Best to accept brooms here are nothing but a lifeline for if you slip."

"If you balance properly, you can minimize the fatigue. That doesn't come easy, but you'll get used to it in time."

Katie's voice from behind, Guy's from up ahead—being flanked like this was definitely reassuring, but it also drove home how much Pete still had to learn. He didn't want to lag behind the two of them.

"The last part's extra steep. Hang on, I'll lower a rope."

Guy scrambled up the tricky section and got a rope secured. Pete had been using both hands to hang onto the tree, so he willingly switched to the rope—it was best to keep your dominant hand free in case of magical beast attacks.

"Better make it quick. Linger here, and they'll think you're vulnerable."

Taking Guy's advice to heart, the other two pressed on—and Katie saw a shadow closing in behind the tall boy.

"…?! Guy, behind you! Look out!"

"Huh?"

Guy spun around and found a demon ape's arm swinging right at him. He reflexively reached for his athame, but before he could defend himself, the blow knocked him sideways. He was flung off the tree into the air.

“Guy!” Pete yelled—and Guy’s fall stopped.

Sensing its partner in trouble, his broom had taken flight, and the lifeline had left Guy dangling in the air. But that was still very exposed. And the hit had shaken him up enough he wasn’t thinking straight yet.

“…Uh… Ah…?”

“Guy, move! The wyverns…!” Katie yelled.

That snapped him out of it. His left hand closed on the broom handle—and the bird wyverns swooped down toward him.

“Ah—ahhhhh!”

Their attack hit before he could reach the tree again. He managed to free his athame and fight back. Katie and Pete covered him as best they could from the tree but weren’t able to deflect all the wyvern strikes. One of the bird wyverns slipped through the spells and knocked the athame out of Guy’s hand, and the next one bit the rope stretched between him and his broom.

“Ah—”

The rope snapped, and Guy dropped, no safety measures left. As he fell, he tried to grab his white wand, but his fingers weren’t moving right. The athame loss had left him with a gouged tendon. Katie and Pete couldn’t get to him in time. He hurtled straight toward the ground—

“Elletardus.”

A force caught him, powerful enough for it to hurt. His descent slowed until he was hovering just above the ground, and an arm wrapped around his chest. Oliver’s catches were a gentle embrace, and this was far rougher—yet that drove home the fact that he was *alive*.

“Gah-ha! Been a while since I caught a plummeter! I just happened to be right under you—you got good luck, kid.”

A hearty laugh echoed in Guy’s ears. Pete and Katie caught up on their brooms, landing by their friend and his savior before running over.

“Guy, are you okay…?”

“Any injuries?!”

“Mm, a trio of second-years? That’s pushing it. You oughta bring an upperclassman with you.”

The burly older boy put Guy down, looking at each person in turn. Katie and Pete weren’t listening—they had their athames pointed skyward. Their friend had survived his fall, but those bird wyverns were still hot on his heels.

“Dumb birds! Gotta teach them a lesson. Gah-ha!”

Spotting them, the upperclassman pulled his athame, raising it high. The blade had a look of scorched steel, and it was soon aglow with magic.

“Turbo Flamma!”

A burning tornado shot out of his blade, spreading rapidly outward and swallowing up eight wyverns in a single shot. The force of the winds trapped them all inside even as it burned them alive. They were suspended

like that for just over ten seconds, then their bodies hit the ground, not a one of them still breathing.

"Gah-ha! Got ourselves a cookout! I was just getting hungry!"

The young man headed toward the nearest bird wyvern corpse, put his athame at the base of the leg, and started carving away. Then he noticed the trio's stares.

"Want some?" he asked. "The thighs are pretty good!"

"…Er, um…" Katie and Pete both looked flummoxed, so the young man took a big bite.

Guy was already reaching into his robe, pulling out a salt shaker.

"…I got seasonings," he offered.

"Oh! Aren't you handy? Gah-ha-ha! Have a seat!"

"Huhhh?!"

They soon recovered Guy's athame and settled down, talking to their older savior. Once he'd heard their names and what had happened, he introduced himself.

"Clifton Morgan, sixth-year. Training to catch up with your friend? I get that!"

He folded his arms, looking them over.

"I admire the spirit, but it's real risky," he told them, his expression severe. "If I hadn't been passing by, that fall could've killed you."

"…I got no excuses," Guy said, well aware of his blunders.

Pete was looking even more downcast. Guy had been exposed precisely because his attention had been on helping his friend.

"Gah-ha-ha! Been through similar stuff myself, many a time. No way you can get by in this school tapping every bridge before you cross it," Morgan said with a laugh. "Nothing wrong with a dangerous bridge or two. What you need to learn is how to get across without dying. Don't rush for results. Rely on your elders another few months. Watch what they do and copy it. That'll make things come naturally."

He ended the lecture there, sprinkling Guy's herb-and-salt blend on the bird wyvern meat. He seemed to be enjoying it despite the haphazard preparation. He chewed a couple of times and swallowed, then shot the trio another grin.

"Can't remember the last time I talked to any second-years! Underclassmen almost never go lower than the third layer. I like this floor! It's teeming with life—"

He glanced around him. He sure made it sound like he lived down here. But before they could ask about that, Morgan clutched his chest.

"Cough, cough!"

As he spluttered, flames belched out of his mouth. They flinched back.

"Whoa…!"

"A-are you all right?! You're breathing fire!"

Even mages were only human—they weren't usually capable of this. Well aware of their shocked looks, Morgan coughed up a few more flames before his fit subsided.

"…All better. Sorry, bit of a shocker, huh?"

He shot them a rueful smile. A few seconds of silence passed as everyone stared at him.

"No, this is a trailblazer's duty, I guess," he said, reconsidering. "I'm actually not gonna get better. Don't have much time left."

Everyone gulped.

"This is the result of crossing one of those dangerous bridges," he said, his hand on his chest. "This inferno's a real ravager. Gah-ha! I was pretty sure I could control it, but no such luck."

Chuckling, he pulled his white wand, and a flame appeared at the tip. Primarily orange, it had tinges of green and brown mixed in—highly distinctive. Their eyes locked on it, watching as it branched and swayed.

"Don't you dare touch it. It'll do a lot more than burn ya. What I'm working with isn't a fire of *this* world. If you're second-years, you've started astronomy by now, right?"

They were almost afraid to admit it. Morgan's explanation built upon that basic knowledge.

"One of the tír that connects up to ours regularly is called Luftmarz. The Ravaging Inferno's Kiln. It's a world where fire flows in place of water. I could bend your ear all day about that environment's peculiarities, but the most singular of them is that the fire itself is evolving. They have multiple types of fire elementals alone," he said. "That suggests this is a world that never had many elements. Where our world is dominated by other types, theirs filled the gaps with a variety of fires. And the ecosystem is built on that. When migrations occur…well, you've heard how the phoenix lives within the flames consuming it?"

He paused there, hand on his chest again.

"I got interested in the nature of those flames. Can't exactly tell you what I did, but… Well, this is the result. Couldn't control it, and it's ravaging me from the inside."

"…You…can't get it out?" Guy asked.

"Afraid there's no treatment. It's fused with my etheric body now. No modern magic techniques can help. And that means I won't live out the year."

Guy was out of ideas, and the man cleaned the last of the meat off the bone.

"So there you have it! The pursuit of sorcery sometimes results in failures you can't walk back. But if you let that scare you, you'll get no results worth having… *Cough, cough!*"

Morgan coughed again, belching flames. When they just watched, speechless, he flashed a big grin.

“Come now, don’t look so gloomy! You’re all mages, right? Failures have their upsides. The data I leave will guide research to come. And they’ll be able to avoid stepping in the same shit I did. I may have a date with death, but it’s one of the best deaths a mage can have! And I get to have a nice long chat with a few lucky underclassmen! Gah-ha-ha!”

He laughed hard at his own joke. This was clearly neither a brave face nor an empty platitude. And that made them feel a little better. At the same time, it was a harsh reminder—research could lead to failure, and that failure to death. And that was hardly unusual at Kimberly.

Seeing them all facing reality in their own way, Morgan’s smile faded.

“Given my condition, I can’t exactly go back to school. But there is one thing preying on my mind. I’d appreciate anything you know,” he said solemnly before asking: “How’s the Blue Swallows’ ace doing?”

“That turn was weak!”

The shout cracked like a lightning bolt.

Nanao had been turning her broom at the edge of the practice arena; Ashbury had spied her opening and jumped on it, her club taking a vicious sideways swipe that the Azian girl just barely managed to block and withstand.

“You’re better than that, Ms. Hibiya!” the Blue Swallows’ ace roared. “Both you and that broom!”

“Naturally!”

Nanao’s response was just as loud, and her broom shot off, the two clashing in the air once again. No one else on the field, no matter the team, dared try to get between those clubs.

“…Yiiikes, is this even a practice match any more?”

“She’s got her eyes on Nanao, poor thing… Granted, Nanao does seem to be having fun?”

The speakers were both on the Wild Geese. One of them took his eyes off the clashing clubs—and spotted something far more alarming. His body went stiff as a board, and he barely managed to croak a warning to the teammate flying with him.

“…Y-yo, look…”

“? What—? Whoa.”

Said teammate reacted exactly the same way, and that reaction spread through the players around them.

“Well, Emmy? Nanao’s flying is something else, isn’t it?”

“……”

Two figures stood in the observation space outside the practice arena. One was a dapper gentleman with rich golden ringlets—Theodore McFarlane. The other was a silver-haired witch, a personification of frozen steel—the headmistress of Kimberly, Esmeralda.

“Oh, don’t mind us!” Theodore called, realizing there were eyes on them. “We’re just watching, so carry on like normal.”

That got things moving again, but…clearly not at anything like peak performance. He shook his ringlets.

“I supposed that’s a bit of an ask, really. ‘Normal’…with *you* watching!”

Their headmistress attending practice was virtually unprecedented. He could hardly blame the athletes for stressing over it.

“But I suppose there are exceptions…”

Two, to be precise. Nanao and Ashbury’s battle raged on, the pair oblivious to their teachers’ presence—and the Kimberly witch’s eyes never left them.

Practice lasted another half hour. When the whistles blew for break, Theodore spied his chance, his voice echoing through the skies.

“Well done, Nanao! I hate to rob you of your rest, but mind joining us?”

“Mm? Oh, Lord McFarlane!”

Clearly only now realizing he was here, Nanao dropped to ground level. Seeing the witch at his side, the Azian girl smiled.

“Unusual company you keep today,” she said.

“Emmy doesn’t make a habit of attending practice. But she’s always loved broomsports. She had real passion for them in her student days.”

“Oh? I was not aware!”

Nanao hopped off her broom, approaching the two teachers. Ashbury came in for a landing behind her, giving the headmistress a curious look.

“Fancy seeing you here,” she said. “Scoping out the rookie, Headmistress? Or her *broom*?”

She didn’t hesitate to pry. But her question earned her an indifferent glance and words that cut her and her question down.

“You’ve gotten *slow*, Ashbury.”

The air froze around them. After several seconds of silence, Ashbury managed shakily, “…Say that again?”

“You were faster a year ago. You’ve grown *better*…but that’s all,” Esmeralda growled. “Are you *scared* to fly without your usual catcher?”

A merciless pile on that left the arena feeling as hostile as the scrape of metal on metal. Their teammates above gulped. But no matter how the Blue Swallows’ ace scowled, Kimberly’s top witch just kept going right for the source of her pride.

“You haven’t set a new personal best in a while. If you’ve reached your limit and are content to train your successors, then so be it. Take a step back and be a *typical* broomrider.”

“Typical?!”

Ashbury’s howl refuted the very concept. She’d have drawn her blade if this wasn’t a teacher—nay, if it wasn’t the headmistress. Seeing the rage in her eyes, Theodore clapped his hands.

“Now, now, calm yourself, Ms. Ashbury,” he said blithely. “Her words may be harsh, but that’s her way of encouraging. You *know* you can fly faster. And that’s all she wants to say.”

This might sound like an olive branch, but it failed to lighten the mood in the slightest. Basking in the light of Ashbury's fury, the headmistress spoke again.

"Seems you haven't entirely lost your moxie. I will reserve my disappointment for another day."

"…!"

Without results, no argument could carry any weight. Realizing that, Ashbury turned her broom and rocketed off toward the skies above. A few teammates called after her, but she ignored them, leaving the arena behind. Nanao watched her go, arms folded.

"Hmm. A brutal form of encouragement."

"We wouldn't put you on the spot like that, Nanao," Theodore said, patting her on the head. "Ms. Ashbury's position is rather exceptional. She's a purebred broomrider."

He turned his smile to her.

"More importantly, do you have time to talk? We'll let you go when your break's over."

Nanao looked at each of the teachers in turn, then smiled, nodding.

"The honor is all mine," she said.

On the grass not far from the arena was a spot perfect for tea parties. Theodore was laying out a tea set on a table made from toolplants.

"This is green tea, commonly consumed in Yamatsu. I was told to brew it with water well below a boil—is this right?"

His spell heated the water in no time, and he poured it into a Yamatsu-made pot, let it steep for a minute, then filled each of their cups. Nanao took a sip of the steaming green liquid, and her eyes lit up.

"Ah! It has been far too long."

The taste of home soothed Nanao, and she turned to the silent witch beside her.

"We have yet to exchange words since the entrance ceremony, Headmistress."

"……"

Esmeralda remained impassive. Nanao took in her face a few moments longer.

"Your headaches have not subsided, then?" she said. "It seems the trick I told you was not enough."

Theodore had been laying out sweets and looked up at this, surprised.

"You can tell?" he asked.

"Theodore."

The witch spoke his name like a hammer on a nail, but he shook her off.

"She already knows," he said. "Nanao, Emmy's headaches have a rather unusual cause. Simple cures will not help. I'm sure she appreciates the thought."

He left it at that, and Nanao did not pursue the topic further. She took another sip of tea, clearly possessed of no motives beyond concern for the witch's well-being. Pleased by that, Theodore smiled.

"Emmy, you should say something," he urged. "You have much to ask."

It took her a moment, but at length, the witch of Kimberly broke her silence.

"…How's your broom?"

"In tip-top shape," Nanao said, glancing at the broom resting beside her. "Amatsukaze has your interest?"

Theodore was using his wand to place plates laden with sweets before each of them.

"More than a little," he said. "It's the only broom in the school—perhaps the world—that would not obey Emmy. And yet, you've made it yours, Nanao."

"Have I? I do my utmost to bring out the broom's power, but I remain no match for Ashbury."

There was a frown on her face. Everyone at Kimberly recognized Nanao's singular talents, but the task before her was a tall one.

"She said a broom was a part of her, like an extra limb. I knew people back home who felt the same about their horses. Yet, I simply cannot conceive of it that way. This broom is my partner. I have no intention of placing it under my control."

Nanao stroked Amatsukaze's handle.

"…Perhaps that's why," Esmeralda murmured.

"Mm?" Nanao blinked at her.

Catching the headmistress's intent, Theodore explained, "The reason your broom—Amatsukaze—accepted you as its rider. Thinking back, she—the previous rider—said much the same thing. 'It has more fun flying with me than anyone else. That's why it lets me ride it and will take me anywhere.'"

Clearly a fond memory for him. And when his eyes turned back to Nanao, there was a mix of aspiration and envy in them. Like gazing at the twinkle of a star he could never hope to reach.

"Most mages see brooms as little more than familiars. That goes for Ms. Ashbury and for Emmy, too. But you're different. And perhaps that's why Amatsukaze chose you. Not as its master—but as its partner."

"……"

Esmeralda voiced no objections to his interpretation. Nanao took this to mean Amatsukaze's previous rider meant a great deal to both of them.

"Very well. Then I shall strive to be a suitable partner," she declared, a smile on her face once more.

With her current riding skills, this was the most she could promise.

When Theodore nodded, Nanao held out her empty cup.

"Lord McFarlane, may I trouble you for another cup?"

"Mm? Oh, but of course."

He pointed his wand at the cup, but as he did, Nanao added something he did not expect.

"The headmistress first, if you would. She seems to want another herself."

Theodore glanced Esmeralda's way—and indeed, her cup had somehow grown empty. He looked rather shocked. Experience had told him that she would never take so much as a sip if she did not intend to speak further.

"…Right you are. My apologies, Emmy. I should have noticed."

"……"

He received only silence in response, and her expression had not once shifted this entire time. But Theodore was certain—she was *enjoying* this.

He shot Nanao a look of gratitude, and then a thought struck him.

"If I could ask one thing, Nanao—are you not afraid? Of her?"

Nanao looked baffled. "? The thought has not once crossed my mind. Though she is certainly intimidating."

Most people would consider fear and intimidation to be two sides of the same coin, but clearly Nanao saw them as entirely separate.

Theodore slapped his knee, laughing. "Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Excellent. That is exactly how you should be, Nanao!"

He happily refilled both their cups, praying this precious moment would linger a while longer.

Oliver's group rode their brooms around the Library of the Depths for some thirty minutes before the door opened and Gwyn's group entered. They flew down to meet them.

"That took a while. Rough one?" Karlie asked.

"Assignment was a poor match for us," Gwyn said. "No injuries sustained."

He, Shannon, and Teresa looked none the worse for wear. Oliver kept his relief to himself.

"Cool. We did the basic library rundown, so should we head on out?"

Karlie took the lead again, and they passed through the doors at the far end, leaving the library behind. Outside, they were bathed in sunlight. Like the second layer, it was illuminated by an artificial sun, the ground blanketed in well-maintained flowerbeds. The last thing Oliver had expected to see here.

"…A park?"

"More of a garden, really. Like the harpies inside, the gnomes look after it."

Karlie had taken a few steps forward, and now she swung back toward them, arms outstretched.

"This place is a perk for any mages who can make it this far. They got everything from herbs to mushrooms; whatever ingredients you need to brew your potions. With gnomes looking after it, you know the quality's guaranteed. Course, if you harvest too many, the reapers come after you."

Oliver nodded. This clarified some things. When they'd been searching for Pete on the third layer, Miligan had suggested Ophelia might be gathering materials on a floor below—and she'd likely meant this garden. Anyone who made regular use of this area needed the proper strength to reliably clear the prerequisite assignments, which was why Miligan had deemed it still *too dangerous* as a fourth-year.

Looking around the garden, Oliver frowned. "I don't see any gnomes," he said.

"They're pretty timid. They hide when we show up. We won't eatcha!"

Karlie cackled, and Oliver's eyes found gardening tools abandoned here and there. A few minutes before, gnomes had been at work in the garden, and the group's arrival had forced them all to take cover behind the foliage. He felt a pang of guilt.

"You'll need a proper tour of the place, but that can wait till the return trip. We're on a mission, so let's hit our destination first."

Karlie clearly knew her way around the place and moved swiftly ahead. The garden wrapped all around the library tower and was pretty large, so it was a solid twenty minutes before the greenery gave way to a large tunnel some fifty yards in diameter. The cross-section was a perfect geometric circle (thus, it was clearly no cave) and the walls themselves were coated in something very smooth.

"This is one of the passages to the fifth layer, commonly known as the helicoid halls. It's just one of twenty. Each of the halls connect to a different point on the fifth layer."

Following her, they stepped carefully inside. A strong gust of wind ruffled Oliver's hair. Ahead, the tunnel curved, and he couldn't see the end—as the name suggested, it was a long and winding spiral.

"If we're h-hitting…Enrico—th-this is the pl-place."

"The reason being?" Oliver pressed.

"First," Karlie said, "less foot traffic than the second layer. We don't want any surprises dropping in, so anything on the higher floors is out. Third layer could go either way, but the terrain sucks, and there's too much aggressive wildlife. If we wanna rule out flukes, tough to call the marsh a good choice.

"So we use the fourth layer's barrier to our advantage. Only mages with the skills to pass the assignments can even get here, which means much less chance of anyone passing through than up above. And most people who do come here are after the books. Unless you got a real good reason to dive further, you don't hit the tunnels."

He nodded. It all made sense. The battle before them was going to be fraught enough as is, and any and all precautions against a third party jumping in were well advised.

"Naturally, there are students who dive to the fifth floor and beyond," Gwyn added. "But they won't be using Hall Eleven here. It leads somewhere

extra perilous. The only people unhinged enough to use it are a handful of teachers…”

“…And one of those is Enrico Forghieri?” Oliver said, increasingly convinced. These conditions sounded highly favorable.

“Exactly. And all this is only half the reason,” Karlie replied.

When Oliver looked surprised, Robert took over.

“T-try using a barrier spell. Aim it at the f-floor. D-don’t hold back.”

“…?”

Puzzled, Oliver drew his athame and aimed it down.

“Clypeus!”

The spell’s light hit the floor…but seconds passed, and no barrier formed. Oliver’s frown deepened.

“…We can’t alter it?”

“That’s right,” Karlie said. “The fourth layer is highly neutral, which means the terrain here is extremely resistant to magical interference. Even on other floors, if you smash a wall down, it fixes itself, right? Basically just an extra strong version of that. Labyrinth homeostasis.”

Oliver experimented with a few more spells, but the results were always the same. No matter the element, spells cast here vanished uselessly into the terrain.

“And then there’s the reapers. They patrol the library heavily, keeping the valuable books safe. But the helicoid halls are out of bounds. They maintain homeostasis, but we can go buck wild, and the reapers won’t show. Best of both worlds.” Karlie grinned.

Oliver nodded, and Karlie looked further down the tunnel.

“Point is, it’s nigh impossible to mess with the terrain magically. Given our objective, can you see why we’d want that?”

“Golem interference,” Oliver said. Not a difficult conclusion to reach.

“Yep!” Karlie said, beaming at him. “You’ve tried chasing Enrico around down here before, so you know how bad it gets. We hit him anywhere else, no telling what golems or magic traps’ll come at us. That happens, the fight’ll just be pure chaos. And we either wear ourselves out and end up obliterated or get bogged down long enough for him to escape—either way, it won’t end well.”

“…I’ve been wondering about that for a while. How does Enrico have so many golems and traps ready and waiting?”

“I’m afraid n-nobody knows. W-we’ve tried tailing and s-scouting but to no avail. But it’s m-more than just the first l-layer. They s-swarm out on the second and third, too.”

Robert’s frustration was clear. They’d spent a year trying to figure it out and learned only that their opponent was not to be trifled with.

“B-but we can *guess*. We s-suspect there’s a g-golem that plants other golems. We h-have s-several theories about how that works but…he c-can’t use it here. The fourth layer’s homeostasis is t-too strong.”

Robert seemed sure of that, at least, and Oliver took him at his word, nodding. They might not know everything, but what they did know was enough to dull their target's advantage. And that was why they'd chosen the helicoid halls.

"We'll still have to fight Enrico Forghieri himself and however many small or medium golems he has on him. But fighting here limits him to that," said Karlie. "Meanwhile, our side has thirty-two committed to the attempt. We go all out, we've got a viable shot."

Enrico Forghieri was a builder. His threat level was concentrated in the golems the man himself designed and constructed. This was a big part of why they were hitting him before the other five targets. If they could peel him away from his golems, fighting only the man himself, then in theory, he'd be one of the easier opponents.

But Oliver was very aware that theory was but a small comfort. There was no chance of starting within the spellblade's range, as he had with Darius. With one Kimberly instructor already taken out, the rest would be on guard against a spellblade. And Enrico himself was hardly a close-range fighter.

And the nature of Oliver's spellblade meant he couldn't hide his intentions until the last possible second. It required extreme concentration, and to activate it at all, he had to be in combat mode, both mentally and physically. His hostility would be more than evident. That was one reason why he'd gone after Darius head-on, baiting him into a duel.

But for all the reasons mentioned, a duel would not be possible this time around. Like Karlie said, victory was only achievable with the full support of his comrades. Armed with that conclusion, he asked, "How long is this hall?"

"Just over seven miles," Karlie answered. "Even at top broomspeed, you can't get through it fast. The tunnels also serve as safety valves, preventing the real nasty customers from wandering up from down below. If we're hitting him, we'd do it somewhere in the middle."

"And it never branches?"

"Not even once. Can't even make one because of the homeostasis. Even if he could, it'd be faster to just kill us all."

Oliver could think of nothing else to ask. He took a few deep breaths. Decision time. With all the advantages this provided, any further hesitation would just be cowardice.

"Very well. We hit the mad old man here."

Even as he said it, a shiver ran down his spine. Fear, tension—and a dark glee that overshadowed those apprehensions.

CHAPTER 4

Forghieri, the Mad Old Engineer

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They might hide themselves in the light of day, but traumatic memories have a way of crawling back up in the middle of the night.

"…Unghhh…"

Midnight, not long after they'd laid down to sleep, Oliver heard a groan from the next bed over. He knew what it was.

"…Haah, haah…haah…!"

"……"

"*Haah, haah*… Ah, ah… Ahhh, aughhhhhhhh!"

"…Pete!"

There was no sign of it dying down; the noises were only getting worse. Oliver leaped out of bed and moved to his friend's side, shaking his shoulders to rouse him.

"Relax, Pete, it's just a dream. I'm right here. Right here with you."

"…Huh… Uh…? …Oh…"

It took several seconds after Pete awoke. He stared at his roommate for a moment, then darted his eyes around the room. Certain everything was as it should be, he at last separated dream from reality, and the tension drained from his shoulders.

"…S-sorry. This again…"

"Don't. This is *not* your fault. Try to catch your breath."

Oliver kept his tone soft, rubbing the boy's back. *No wonder Pete's having nightmares*.

What the mad old man had shown them in his workshop took morality and ethics and trampled them into the mud. An insane invention that hurled countless lives into the kiln; seeing the Dea Ex Machina, hearing how he'd arrived at the concept and execution, and worse—*understanding* it. That would rattle anyone, especially someone who'd been introduced to magic just two years before.

Oliver could tell it had shattered any number of things within his friend. Concepts of right and wrong he'd still been clutching to, nonmagical norms he could have lived a lifetime without questioning, all leveled in one go.

Pete knew better now. He knew what mages were, where their extremes lay, that those extremes might well lie at the end of the path he treaded—and that no one pursuing sorcery would criticize him for it.

He was forced to redefine everything—ethics, morals, right and wrong. Concepts at the core of one's personhood shaken and questioned anew. That would be an ordeal for anyone. Oliver had been through it once himself.

“…Pete, over here.”

Oliver put one arm around Pete’s back and the other under his knees, hefting him up.

“Er…?”

Blinking, Pete let himself be carried from his own night sweat–soaked bed over to Oliver’s. He was laid gently down and embraced from behind.

“ ——— Uh…?!”

“Sorry it had to be my bed. But if you’re willing, we can stay like this awhile.”

Oliver pulled the covers up, covering both of them. Their bodies pressed tightly together.

“…Your pulse is racing. Mana circulation’s off, too. Might as well do some healing while we’re at it.”

“Wai—! …Mm…!”

Before Pete could protest, Oliver slid his hand up the back of his friend’s pajamas. Pete could feel mana flowing into him through his skin. Oliver had done this for him any number of times but never in such close contact, and…

“…Er, um… Today, I’m…!”

“Mm?”

He had almost said he was a girl today but let the words die on his tongue.

He knew saying that would make Oliver let go, apologize for the lack of consideration, reflect upon his own actions, and draw lines he shouldn’t cross.

Oliver might never touch him like this again.

Oliver’s contact with him, this narrow distance between them—both were clearly that of a close *male* friend. That hadn’t changed since he awakened as a reversi. Pete had preferred it that way and said aloud he wanted them to stay as they were before. Oliver had taken him at his word.

And so Pete was sure if he even once said he was *a girl today*, that spell would be broken. And he might lose this warmth forever.

Each time he felt the words crawl up his throat, he choked them back down.

“…Never mind.”

“Should I keep going?”

“……”

Oliver felt a slight nod and took that as permission. He resumed healing, unaware of how much this contact rattled the boy’s heart.

“…This takes me back,” Oliver said. “I was in your position, but my mother used to do this for me. On windy nights, or…”

Oliver’s smile had grown wistful. Relaxing into his friend’s palms, Pete listened closely.

“If I begged for a story, she always had a new one. So many stories, so good they just kept me awake, and my father would have to stop her. And all three of us would oversleep the next day. I loved that.”

As he spoke, Oliver’s fingers tousled the ashy hair in front of him. He spoke of days lost, and Pete’s chest tightened. These rare glimpses of his past were the one time his stalwart friend seemed fragile. Like a single push would send him tumbling down.

Pete could tell this scar ran very deep.

And if he stayed weak, he’d never be able to ease Oliver’s pain.

“…Don’t…worry *too* much,” Pete said.

“?”

He squeezed Oliver’s hand back. Last year was one thing, but he’d survived a year here. He was a little bit stronger now.

“…I’m not about to swallow that stuff whole.”

Pete wanted to clear that up, at least. Given what they’d seen in the old man’s workshop, he knew what his roommate’s primary concern would be.

“Same goes for Katie. She’s learning a lot from Miligan, but that doesn’t mean she’ll end up like her. She’s taking the knowledge and techniques and applying them in her own way, forging her own path forward. I’m doing the same thing.”

He was doing his level best to sound tough, but he could tell Oliver’s fears still lingered.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Pete added. “I don’t have a clear goal like she does. I’m well aware of that. I’m still feeling my way forward on everything. But…”

He paused, tightening his grip on Oliver’s hand. He wasn’t Katie. He wasn’t striving toward conceptual ideals. But he had someone worth following.

“…But…I *do* have a role model.”

Pete’s voice shook; it took all his courage to say that. It felt like leaping off a precipice. *You’re my goal. It’s* your *path I’m following.*

And this admission of a lifetime—earned him a smile.

“…Good. It’s good to have someone to look up to.”

“…!”

That reaction told Pete the most important part had not gotten across at *all*. Oblivious to his roommate’s feelings, Oliver tightened his embrace, smiling.

“Gah—?!”

And Pete jerked his head backward, hitting Oliver’s jaw. Once wasn’t enough, and he landed two, then three more blows, a series of dull *thunk*s.

“O-ow! Wait, Pete, why are you—?!”

“Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

Requests for clarification just added insult to injury. Oliver was stuck taking a headbutting to the chin for a solid ten minutes before Pete’s tantrum subsided.

When the night ended, Oliver woke up and opened the curtains, letting the summer sun stream in. Not too hot, not too cold. The blue sky was pocked with low-hanging clouds. A gentle breeze from the west ruffled his hair.

"……"

A peaceful morning. Ironic, given what today held in store.

"…Morning, Pete. Sugar in your tea?"

"……Two, please."

Oliver glanced back to find Pete sitting up, rubbing his eyes. Then Pete's memories caught up with him, and he turned bright red, avoiding his roommate's gaze. Laughing, Oliver got the tea ready, just like always.

Guy joined them in the dorm hall, and on the path to school, they met the girls coming out of their dorm. Katie spotted them and waved.

"Oh, morning, Oliver! Pete and Guy!"

"You must hear this at once! This morning, Katie spoke in her sleep, saying the most amusing—"

"Augh! You can't start with that!"

Katie clapped a hand over her roommate's mouth. Watching them make merry, Oliver smiled. He worried he might look tense.

"…When we first got here, only me and Nanao really filled our plates," Guy said, looking around the table.

They'd headed right to the Fellowship and were tackling their breakfasts amid the hubbub of the morning rush. Guy's comment was specifically directed at Katie and Pete, who were both really packing it away.

"But man, these two are getting nuts. Like shoveling wood onto a hearth."

"Not eating is a waste! You're no better, Guy! Here, oatmeal!"

"What, *oatmeal*?! I mean, sure, I'll eat it. But still!"

Katie shoved a bowl Guy's way, and he dug straight in. Stifling a laugh, Oliver glanced to his side, and Pete caught the look. He dropped his toast, stabbing a fork into his steamed veggies instead.

"…I'm eating my greens, see?"

"Nice. Proud of you, Pete."

Oliver patted his head. Pete snorted and kept eating. Chela took a quiet sip of tea, saying nothing. It was just like any other morning.

Morning classes wrapped up without a fuss—a few injuries, but nobody batted an eye at that anymore. Katie shot out of the room first thing, headed to her next appointment.

"Okay! I'm off to see my griffin!"

"I'll be in the library. Guy, Katie, don't forget! Study group after dinner."

"Yeah, I know! I'm literally about to go do some spell practice."

Pete and Katie were gone, and Guy stayed behind for a little elective study. Waving to him, Oliver followed Nanao and Chela out, but then turned the other way.

"…I'm gonna stop by the bathroom. You two go on ahead."

"Certainly," said Chela.

Making it seem natural, Oliver slipped through the bathroom doors. Luckily, it was empty, and he hid himself in a stall.

“Blegh…!”

No sooner had the door closed then the contents of his stomach hit the bowl. The acid made the back of his tongue sting; he heaved again and again.

“Haah…hah…”

When there was nothing left to expunge, he finally righted himself, resting against the stall wall. One hand pulled the handle, and water washed the contents away. He felt like his face was a far more convincing actor than his stomach.

After a minute’s rest, he left the stall, washed his hands thoroughly, and then rinsed his mouth out. He checked his face carefully in the mirror. He wasn’t sure he was hiding the tension completely, but at least his eyes weren’t bloodshot from lack of sleep. Perhaps Pete had helped him sleep well. With that thought in mind, he left the bathroom.

“Feeling a tad under the weather?”

The voice echoed through the deserted hall, and—there was a small girl next to him. He was past being surprised by this.

“You’re one dedicated covert operative,” he said. “You usually follow me into the men’s room?”

“Certainly not under ordinary circumstances. But today…”

Teresa trailed off, looking up at him with concern.

Marveling at that fact, he mustered a goofy shrug. “Don’t be too worried. Given who we’re up against, I think this is the *right* level of stressed.”

“Any means to ease it?”

“There are, but I have no wish to bring in potions that’ll affect my mental state. Can’t risk any dull to my edge.”

He slowly balled up his fist. He had to be in peak condition. No way he could ever face the warlock otherwise.

“You aren’t scared, Teresa?” he asked, gazing back at her.

She looked down, considering the question.

“I’m…not sure,” she replied. “Scared of death? Not especially. I was born and raised here in Kimberly, after all.”

And that meant risking her life was a daily occurrence. Fear and cowardice only got in the way, so she’d long since eliminated them both. That was the education she’d received, and her answer served as a reminder to Oliver.

“……”

“……?”

Without realizing it, his hand had reached out to her, his fingers mussing her black hair. He was sure Teresa herself had no clue what that meant. She shot him a baffled look, and he grimaced.

“…We’re all messed up, huh?”

Each was concerned for the other, but their feelings never quite connected. Perhaps they had that in common. Deep down, neither one of them could admit they were worth caring about.

And their mutual damage felt good right now. Though part of him hated himself for finding salvation in that feeling.

"Don't worry. Same as before," he told her. "Once the fire's lit, the shaking subsides."

He met her eyes, the vow unwavering. Teresa nodded.

"I believe in you, my lord," she said. She recalled the night he'd claimed their first target. If she could see that sight again—that was all the motivation she needed.

Meanwhile, on the labyrinth's fourth layer, deep in the Library of the Depths' shelves of forbidden tomes…

"What'd you make of him?"

Parked at a reading table, checking over their athames and magic tools, Karlie and Robert were waiting for the operation commencement. Groups of their comrades were on standby around the labyrinth, ready to converge on the battlefield when the time came.

"…Y-you mean our lord?"

"Yep. The kid."

Robert looked up from his cursed tools.

Her feet up on the table, Karlie went on, "I ain't talking about his current combat skills. That's our thing, and it's the king's job to sit at the back looking regal. If he's weak, it's no big deal." Then she added, "What I don't get is why it's *him*. Not Gwyn or one of the other upperclassmen. But *this* kid. He's a good kid! Too good to be at Kimberly at all. And forcing a kid like him to play boss puts a bad taste in my mouth. Even if this is about his mom."

She was among the eldest of their comrades and acting like it.

"…I th-think…I get it, though," Robert said quietly.

"Elaborate," Karlie barked, thumping her heel on the table.

"I d-don't know how," Robert started, shaking his head. "Just…he has something I d-don't. Something you don't; n-none of our other comrades do. Deep down inside his…his c-character."

Karlie listened to his halting speech intently, frowning. She pouted her lips.

"I *hate* abstract shit like that."

"Ha-ha-ha. You always h-have."

Robert smiled at her, and she snorted. This was how they usually were—and how they'd remain until the fight began.

The day seemed endless, but at last it was nine PM. Oliver stepped onto the labyrinth's first layer.

"Yo!"

He was met by an older girl just beyond the painting he'd entered. He nodded at her and moved right past.

“Assides Imitantor Vitae.”

As the spell left her lips, she was enveloped in a thick fog—and when it cleared, there stood a second Oliver Horn. A perfect imitation, down to the hairs on his head and even the shape of his nails.

“Got your alibi covered. Go all out.”

“I will.”

And with that, Oliver headed for the labyrinth depths, leaving no lingering concerns behind.

His first friend was nonmagical. This is true of many mages, though few talk of it much.

It’s hardly strange for mages born to ordinary parents, or mages residing in ordinary towns and villages, to befriend nonmagicals. But it’s surprisingly common even among the children of storied magical houses, although they have a mage’s mentality drilled into them from an early age and tend to look down on ordinary people as a result.

A famed magical comedian once put the reason in plain terms—they were suffocating.

“The more history your family has and the greater your talent, the greater the expectation and responsibility riding on your little shoulders. Children under that pressure day and night grow weary of it, and when they hear of a world outside where the rules are different—they get curious. But if you want to get there, you need a go-between.”

He was clearly speaking from experience, and his words had carried weight accordingly. In his case, it had been a boy who delivered milk to his manor every morning—and that boy had been his point of contact to ordinary society. There were plenty of mages who had ordinaries employed as servants, but there were many ways to make first contact.

And not all of them were particularly commendable.

“ _____ aaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAHH!!!”

As the dawn sky lightened, a boy on a broom came flying in, his scream trailing behind him. He was maybe eight years old. He wore beautiful, tailored robes poorly, showing both that he came from money and that he didn’t know what that meant.

“…Uh-oh, him again.”

“He’s extra loud this morning…”

A farmer couple glanced up from their just-heading cabbages. Everyone had long since stopped being surprised by his arrivals. “The crybaby’s morning broomrides” were famous in these parts. They happened once a fortnight.

“Aughhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!”

His broom carried him across the fields, and the rustic town spread out below him. As new ground was broken, the population was starting to expand, but it was still very deep country. There were towns just like it all across Yelgland.

Fixing his tear-blurred vision on the streets below, he turned his broom's head down, flying straight to his destination—past the houses on the outskirts, toward the central shopping area's west side, where little shops catered to morning shoppers. The boy chose a clearing just outside as his landing zone.

"Wahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!"

He failed to slow in time and lost his balance. His feet barely hit the ground, and he dropped his broom, stumbled forward, and went rolling across the street. He crashed headfirst into some empty barrels, and splintered timber flew everywhere.

"Waaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!"

His head popped out of the wood piles, his wails growing extra powerful. He'd gotten off with minor scratches—mages were sturdy like that—but they still hurt. Heads popped out of buildings all around, wondering what the racket was, and saw him lying there. Then a girl came running around the corner.

"…I thought that was you! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What, you blow the landing again? You're so dumb!"

"Wahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!"

The boy's cries seemed liable to split his throat. Subjected to that at point-blank range, the girl snapped her hands to her ears, laughing.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha! You sure can belt it out! My ears are splitting!" She pulled out a lollipop. "Come on now, stop crying!" she told him, shoving it right in his mouth. The boy's wails ceased.

"…Mmph."

"Mm, mm! There's a good boy!"

She took a knee, rubbing his frizzy hair with both hands like he was a dog. An older woman's face popped out of the crowd around—she ran the candy store.

"Him again, Noemi? He can come all he likes, but he needs to land quietly! I'm always scared he'll come crashing through my roof next time."

"Aw, he's not *that* bad," the girl said. "He's picking safe places to land! And if you do smash someone's house, you can fix it for them, right, little mage?"

The boy sniffled and pulled the candy out of his mouth. He moved it to his left hand, then pulled his white wand and cast a spell. The smashed-up barrels were soon restored to normal, lining the street like nothing had happened to them.

The girl grinned and turned back to the candy store lady.

"Can we get some candy, Aunt Monica? Four lollipops, please."

"So why were you crying today?" Noemi asked.

They were walking together, working on their lollipops, and she'd decided the boy was calm enough to talk. His hand clenched the candy's stick tight.

“…I was drawing a blueprint. It’s gonna be the biggest golem in the world! I told you about my dream, right?”

“Mm-hmm. I remember. You talk about it a lot. You said with normal construction, it won’t move at all if it gets too big?”

She remembered him babbling excitedly, clearly prepared to talk her ear off until the sun went down.

“Mm, so I need technological revolutions in fuel, materials, and construction. I don’t even have a clue yet on fuel, so I’m working on the other two.”

He shoved his hand into his robe and pulled out a folded-up piece of paper. He spread it out and showed it to the girl.

“This is it. The red parts are my mom’s corrections.”

“Yikes.”

Noemi didn’t know if the blueprint itself was any good, but the sheer detail and energy of the lines spoke volumes about how fired up he’d been.

What made her yelp were the red comments scrawled across it, like barrels of ice water dumped on a fire. Requesting grounds for the numbers, pointing out poor material choices, lists of flaws in the design—she’d been merciless. That alone was enough to kill a boy’s spirit, but the final evaluation was extra merciless: *Blueprints are not for drawing your fantasies.*

“I can’t take it anymore! Day after day of staring at data and other people’s work, and she never lets me make anything my way! If I ask, she just says I’m not ready yet! I’ve gotta be a perfect builder first! Better than perfect!”

“Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Your mom sure doesn’t pull her punches!”

Noemi laughed heartily, one eye on the boy’s downcast face. He was still licking that lollipop.

“You gonna quit the whole mage thing?” she asked.

It took him a second, but he shook his head.

“…No. I haven’t made anything yet!” he said. “But…the more work I have to do, and the more mean things she says…I…I just can’t breathe. Before I know it, I’m on my broom. It’s like I’ll explode if I don’t scream across the sky.”

He looked up at the girl.

“Do you ever get like that, Noemi?”

“Sure!” she said, hands on her hips. “I can’t fly, but the rest? You betcha.”

“Really?”

“Yep! Our shop’s pretty big, right? You gotta be nice to some not-nice people. And I’m gonna be running the place one day, so I’ve gotta be there to help.”

This sounded all grown-up, but she was just telling the truth. The boy knew she wasn’t showing off or making herself sound important. Her family ran the second largest dry goods shop in town. They’d opened their doors to

meet a rise in demand as the town expanded, and that had paid off, their profits rising steadily over the past decade.

But growth like that often caused internal conflict, and as their eldest, she was dragged right into the middle of it. She might be ten years old, but in a small town like this, that was almost grown-up. The future of her family business could well depend on her proving she had what it took.

Truth was, she was probably too busy to hang out eating candy. Part of him knew that, but he kept coming to see her anyway. This girl might be two years older, but she was his first friend, and her advice had helped him a lot.

"…What do you do when it gets tough?"

"Laugh," she said.

He gave her a shocked look, and she demonstrated.

"If I feel like crying, I let out a laugh. So loud it makes everyone jump," she explained. "And the weird thing is, it helps everyone. They get caught up in my laughter and start to see the upside. Sometimes they scold me for it, but— Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The laugh ripped out of her so loudly the people around them jumped. She stopped in her tracks and turned toward the boy.

"So when you feel like crying, eat some candy."

"…Does that help?"

"Yep! If your mouth is filled with something sweet, the rest doesn't feel so bad."

She brandished her own lollipop with a flourish. She'd given him one the day they first met, and it had become their thing. A spell to stop his tears.

"Then go on and laugh. So loud it shocks your mom. Take all the energy you got for crying and use it up!"

Her arms were in the air.

"Candy makes you smile! Smiles are invincible! Remember this simple formula, and everything will be okay."

Noemi flashed her teeth at him. The boy didn't know how she did it, but seeing that smile always banished the clouds in his heart.

"But if you *still* wanna cry, then go on and come to me. I'll be right here! When I hear you wailing, I'll come running."

With that promise, she started walking again. He scrambled after her. She glanced back his way, the morning sun catching her bashful smile.

"So give me a ride on your broom someday, crybaby Enrico."

Many Kimberly faculty members were also cutting-edge researchers in their respective fields of sorcery.

Naturally, the contents of their work were a closely guarded secret. They each had workshops in the school building, but it was the norm for genuinely important research to be conducted elsewhere, namely: deep in the labyrinth—for the most part, beyond the fourth layer barrier, in the fifth layer—or even lower.

This was true for Enrico Forghieri. The Library of the Depths contained a wealth of data, and his trips between that and his workshop inevitably led him through the helicoid halls. The mad old man rather liked the quiet and generally kept his nose buried in a borrowed tome during the long trek down. Servant golems trailed behind.

Ideal for an ambush.

“ _____ Mm?”

Sensing someone up ahead, Enrico’s eyes left the page.

There was a figure standing twenty yards away. Not very large—perhaps a student? He couldn’t make out any details; some sort of spell was preventing him from identifying the individual. The mask covering half the figure’s face seemed the likely cause.

“Don’t often run into students in these halls,” the old man called, pausing his advance. “You have business with me?”

There was a long silence before the figure answered. The voice, too, was magically altered, making it impossible to hazard a gender.

“The night of April eighth, 1525, of the Great Calendar. Where were you, and what were you doing?”

No mistaking the purpose of that question. The old man stroked his chin, thinking.

“April eighth, 1525? …Oh! *That* day,” he said. “I remember it well! Such a busy day. I gathered some prickly colleagues, paid a visit to a witch’s retreat in some out-of-the-way locale—”

He spoke fondly, the words flowing smoothly.

“—and beat a student of ours to death. Taking our time with it.”

Not an ounce of hesitation. Like sharing a pleasant memory.

“…And how did that make you feel?” the shadow asked.

“Oof, that’s tricky. Very tricky. How to put those feelings into words?” The old man paused dramatically, his lips twisting into a smile. “That distinct guilty pleasure of taking a peerless treasure and smashing it to pieces, grinding those pieces beneath your feet. At your age, I’m sure you’ve yet to savor the like, yes?”

Enrico spoke like he was consoling a recalcitrant child.

“Indeed not. I know only one thing,” the shadow said, its tones measured. “The torment she endured when betrayed, smashed, and trampled.”

No understanding could be reached here. That had never been in the cards. The shadow—Oliver—released the enmity he’d barely held in check. The time was ripe. The passage began filling up. Enrico scanned his surroundings, taking in the crowd. Each figure wore a mask, their uniforms bereft of anything that would identify their year.

“Revenge, eh?” the old man whispered. “I assume this is connected to Darius’s disappearance, then.”

Even surrounded, he did not seem the least bit disturbed. The gleam in his eyes suggested he was *enjoying* this.

“You have the numbers, and you’ve chosen your location well. I can see this plan has been carefully considered. You’re an organized group with personnel inside campus and out.”

He grinned.

“I approve! An admirable degree of dedication.”

Analysis and evaluation. Oliver had no ears for it. And the comrades behind him caught his intent.

“Deploy it, Shannon,” Gwyn said.

“Mm.”

She nodded, and something expanded around her. The feeling was like being wrapped in invisible cloth, and Enrico frowned.

“…Hmm? What did you—?”

“”””””””Tonitrus!”””””””””

“”””””””Fortis Flamma!”””””””””

He was interrupted by incantations from fore and aft. Waves of spells buffeted the old man, the flash and smoke obscuring him from sight. With the first blow struck, Oliver stepped back, his comrades taking his place.

“A singlecant to pin me down, and a double in a different element to crush me. Quite the greeting!”

He sounded positively giddy. As the smoke cleared, they saw the mad old man on a multi-legged golem, protected by sturdy armor. Neither he nor the golem were the worse for wear—he’d successfully weathered the group’s opening volley.

“Shall we begin? Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

His hands emerged from both sleeves, a lollipop between each finger—eight in all. Enrico crunched down on all of them at once, issuing a declaration of war. The six-legged golem darted forth at speeds too fast for the eye to follow, clearly *much* higher spec than anything he’d assigned in Oliver’s class. There were balls at the tips of every leg, and these could spin in any direction, allowing for complex, precise motion.

“A multipedal on ball rollers…!”

“Disrupt its footing!”

“Fragor!”

Oliver’s comrades scattered magic tools, combined spells that made the terrain mildly worse, and hammered them with spells. But Enrico’s golem ran right up the walls, its progress unimpeded. Misaimed spells struck the walls fruitlessly. The tubular passage and the ball rollers were an uncannily good match; the modest impediments laid down proved to be of little consequence as the golem raced across floor, walls, and ceiling at will. Oliver was not surprised. Enrico had chosen his golem with this terrain in mind.

“Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! Now it’s my turn! **Tonitrus!**”

And then the old man started firing spells between the chinks in the armor. Under a barrage from thirty-two mages, avoiding their attacks with every mobility trick in the book, his aim was uncannily accurate. Nearby allies barely managed to negate it with the oppositional element before it struck home.

“Don’t panic! We’ve got his retreat blocked in both directions.”

Gwyn’s voice urged calm, but nobody here would lose their nerve this soon. They were up against a Kimberly instructor. None of them had thought this would be *easy*.

“However agile it is, in an enclosed space like this, it can’t evade forever. Try one thing at a time.”

This brief exchange had been enough that they were starting to get a handle on the foe. It looked like the old man was trying to avoid big hits, so he wasn’t moving toward groups of three or more. They started using that to their advantage, baiting the golem, giving it an escape route, and leading it where they wanted.

“ _____ Hng!”

As Enrico hit their mark, every athame turned his way. Gwyn’s call planned for every escape route.

“Flatten it!”

“”””””””Extruditor!”””””””””

Sideways pressure slammed the golem against the wall; not enough to stop it, but it was forced to strain its legs, pushing back against the pressure.

“”””””””Ducere!”””””””””

“ _____ Mm?!”

And *that* was their real aim. As the golem pushed back, their next spell yanked it the other way, peeling it off the wall. Its own force used against it, the golem and Enrico spun through the air, exposed to the attacks of every mage around. However good the ball rollers were, they could do nothing without solid footing.

“”””””””Magnus Fragor!”””””””””

Over twenty double-incantation spells buffeted the golem before it hit the ground. Each struck with sound and fury. And the golem was defenseless—surely this had done more than their first volley. This time, Enrico *must* have taken damage. Oliver watched with bated breath.

"…Ack—"

"…Gah…"

" ——— !"

Three comrades went down, smoking at the mouths. No one had expected that, and every face tensed.

"What happened?!"

"Spell recoil!"

"That was no accident—something induced it!"

The analysis and inferences matched Oliver's own. Doublecant spells were powerful, but a loss of control would cause a backfire, harming the caster. Yet, no mage here would make such a basic error, much less three at once. There was clearly another factor at work, something that had made their spells detonate.

"…Kya-ha-ha-ha! That was good!"

Adding insult to injury, the multipedal golem came bounding out of the smoke. There were some burns and dents on the armor, but that was it for visible damage; far less than they'd hoped. Oliver's comrades were incensed.

"…Enemy's alive and well! Golem damage minimal!"

"That thing's armor is too damn hard!"

"Durable alone doesn't cover it! There's gotta be a trick to it!"

This golem's design was clearly built to prioritize mobility. No matter what it was made from or how ingenious the design, it should not have been sturdy enough to weather twenty-plus doublecant spells. That was a constructional limit based upon the fundamentals of magical engineering.

"…You catch it, Shannon?"

"……Mm, got it."

It was Oliver's sister who solved the contradiction first. Within the zone she'd deployed, she felt a faint—yet clear—shift.

"…Lots of little ones, all around… Like elementals…but not."

Not the most articulate, but enough for Oliver and Gwyn to grasp her meaning. The enemy golem's inexplicable defense, the induced recoil—this explained *both* of them, so Oliver yelled with conviction.

"Look out for disruption magic! There's nano golems in the air!"

That caused a stir. The multi-legged golem stopped dead.

"…Fascinating. You noticed them?" Enrico's voice emerged from the chinks in the armor, sounding impressed.

Oliver raised a hand, halting his comrades' attacks.

"That requires more than simply on-the-scene analysis," Enrico said, delighted. "You must have had a pre-prepped hypothesis proven by events that transpired. Excellent work!"

Oliver let him finish, engaging him. Any new discoveries required a tactical adjustment. It was best to buy some time.

"…A pillar of your research, Enrico Forghieri?"

"Indeed. You can see the logic, I'm sure! To achieve macro success, I must first master the micro. If you've read a few of my papers, I'm sure you're already nodding along."

Enrico dished this out like it was a reward for seeing through the trick. This placed him at a disadvantage, although the mad old man himself didn't seem to care. In his mind, he was a teacher, surrounded by students.

"You all know perfectly well elementals form symbiotic relationships with certain magical beasts. My connection to these aerial nano golems is much the same, albeit with one exception—they serve at my behest. They automatically cancel out any attacks directed at me—or deflect them."

That was the secret to the impossible defense. The multipedal golem wasn't blocking the spells at all; the nano golems hovering around it were. Just like the wind elementals had protected the garuda Oliver fought, countless nano golems were protecting Enrico. And these were far more durable than those elementals.

"Naturally, they are not *merely* defensive. At my prompting, they can attack directly or interfere with spell activation, causing denotations. You know very well spell activation is the most unstable moment!"

Oliver gritted his teeth. This, too, was exactly like the disruption magic the garuda had used. The same trick he'd used to knock Nanao out in his workshop. And what was most galling was that without knowledge of the nano golem concept, you could never hope to defeat them.

"So what next, children? You chose this location to minimize my repertoire, but things aren't quite going according to plan, are they? After all, here I am, with this utility golem and—"

He broke off as glittering gas jetted out from between the multipedal golem's legs, spreading around it like mist caught in the sun. He had *clearly* made these nano golems light up so they'd be visible to the naked eye.

"—approximately two hundred trillion nano golems. The odds are *slightly* in my favor," Enrico added, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

He could easily have released them unseen, without any warning, but chose not to. He wanted the students facing him to correctly perceive the threat—that he might savor their attempts to foil it.

"How will you handle *this*? Summon winds? High heat? Or perhaps freeze them? Try anything you like!"

The glow vanished, and the nano machines blended into the air itself. Oliver concluded none of those approaches would work. It would boil down to a contest of strength—the force of their spells against the golem's capacity for interfering with them. If the air had enough nano golems concentrated in it, they could easily deflect twenty-odd doublecanted spells. And given their foe's wild movements, trying to focus any extra fire would be impractical.

So Oliver flipped the logic. The nano golems were *not* evenly distributed through a space this large. With that in mind, he aimed his athame high.

"Go red! Repeat! **Densa nebula!"**

""""""""""Densa nebula!""""""""""

All comrades chanted after him. Red mist poured from the tips of their athames, and the wind currents carried it to all corners.

"…Interesting," Enrico purred.

This was *just* a red mist—no magical effect, no elemental affinity. So the nano golems did not react to it.

A gust came down the tunnel, sweeping much of the mist with it. Yet, several red pockets remained, including one directly above the multipedal golem.

"The shadow is cast," Oliver said, his eyes on the mottled red mist. For microorganism-sized golems to remain suspended in the air, or move around, they had to follow the air itself. And that meant that the greater the density of golems, the more mist would remain.

"Can you order them to remove the red, Enrico? Is that a function your beloved golems have?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He was certain they could not. Issuing an order would render Enrico defenseless. The golems themselves could not detect plain red mist, and any means of handling this would require instructions from Enrico himself. And while they obeyed that, their autonomous defense would be lost.

"Go on and try, if you dare. We'll be waiting to pounce," Oliver growled.

Currently, the field of microengineering was *solely* Enrico's domain. That meant it was highly likely any attempts to directly deal with the nano golems would be fruitless. If they had time for trial and error, that would be one thing, but they were in a battle to the death.

Yet, they were *mages*. This was hardly their first time dealing with things invisible to the naked eye. There were ways to handle things not directly observable—as they did the ether and the soul. And now that they'd caught their shadow, the nano golems were no longer an unseen threat.

"And here, you cannot draw more mana from the labyrinth itself. Keeping countless nano golems active must be a titanic drain on your reserves. I imagine you're feeling it in your bones, old man."

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I like it. No one's insulted my age in years!" Enrico cackled. "Let's find out, shall we? Can you all stay standing until I start to wheeze?"

No longer concerned about the nano golems' visibility, Enrico's multipedal golem began moving again, dragging the red cloud with it. Oliver's comrades moved to resume their attacks, so Oliver barked further orders.

"…Concentrate your spells to dissipate the nano golem distribution. Then, break off two of the multipedal's legs and seize our chance to crack the armor. We've got to expose Enrico himself."

Observing the movements of the mist made it clear how the nano golems' magical interference worked. If they were canceling or deflecting, the space in the spell's trajectory would *always* take a deep red hue. And if one location darkened, another grew light. There was a limit to their total number, so this was inevitable. Even if two hundred trillion was no exaggeration, it was nowhere near enough to fill a hall this size.

"Once that's done, I'll finish things."

Oliver saw a path to victory. He quivered with anticipation, tightening his grip on his athame. If he could reach one-step, one-spell distance, there'd be no escaping. His spellblade would end this charade.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! No one's hesitating now! I approve!"

And matching that lack of hesitation, the ball rollers went wild, the golem's movements growing snappier, trickier. Make it block a spell, then strike again where the red mist had thinned—that was all they had to do, but the nimble motions of Enrico's transport prevented it. Watching this, Oliver was forced to admit the mad old man was not just the world's best builder but a top-class golem operator.

"We've gotta stop those legs," came a voice. "**Colligationem.**"

Yet, as long as a *person* controlled it, the movements would be biased. And one of their number had been watching long enough. Her spell slipped through the gap in the mist, slamming down on one of the legs. The golem slowed, and Enrico let out a cry.

"A powerful spell, devoid of any delicacy! That must be you, Ms. Buckle!"

"Ah-ha-ha! Brutal! I know my magical engineering grades sucked, but I still passed!"

Their other comrades were already firing off spells, and Karlie herself didn't hesitate to close in. She was heedless of the spells burning her flesh in passing. Before her very eyes, the golem tried to dodge a concentrated burst of fire—but Karlie's athame flashed a step ahead of it.

"…What?!" the old man yelped in surprise.

There was a clang, and the tip of the severed leg rolled across the floor. The most damage they'd done so far.

Karlie quickly backed away, mindful of counters.

"One down!" she said, grinning. "Don't need delicacy to smash someone's work to pieces, do ya, Instructor Enrico?"

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! You certainly don't beat around the bush! You're the last person I'd want as a student."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Is that any way for a teacher to talk?"

Their laughs echoed through the hall. Oliver felt a chill run down his spine. They'd been student and teacher for over six years and were trading quips and sarcasm even as they tried to kill each other. That was a mage's battlefield for you.

"""""""""Fragor!"""""""""

With the golem down one leg, they seized their chance, pounding it with spells. Enrico tried to dodge like before, but the loss of a leg was no small matter. The old man knew that perfectly well.

"Playing defense will just whittle me down! Very well—time to change the game!"

No sooner had the words left Enrico's lips than approximately half the red mist around the multipedal golem scattered to the air. Oliver's comrades tensed. This significantly lowered their foe's defenses—but obviously not *just* that.

"Tonitrus!"

As his golem swiftly dodged another volley, the old man chanted a spell of his own. A perfectly ordinary lightning spell fired through the chinks in the armor. He was a Kimberly teacher, and the power was absurd, but there was more than enough distance to dodge it. The few comrades in its path easily moved to avoid it—and then the bolt bent in the air, striking two of them at once.

"Kahhh!"

"Guh…"

"?!"

"What? It curved?!"

The unexpected hit rattled them. Enrico was firing spell after spell, each one changing course in midair, raining down upon his foes. None of these changes were ordinarily possible.

Six more were hit in rapid succession, but no one let that get them down—they were all focused on figuring this out. The red mist was spread out through the air, forming a number of clusters. And the spells were changing paths in *those*. The first to notice that called out.

"Wait—he's using the nano golems…to change the direction of his own spells?!"

"Careful! No telling what angle they'll take!"

"Right answer! But I'm not slowing down!" Enrico hollered. "**Tonitrus! Frigus! Flamma!**"

Spells shot in all directions; blocking them was clearly impossible. The comrades aimed at the red mist, scattering it with gust spells—but once scattered, the mist merely collected again nearby, forming a new deflection point. Some tried creating magic bubbles to enclose the nano golems, but their interference easily broke them free. And worst of all, the hail of spells continued unabated.

"Crap, this isn't just curving!"

"Spells from head-on are hitting us in our backs!"

With no signs of an effective strategy, eight more comrades were down in a few dozen seconds. Focusing on defense and raising a barrier could allow them to weather things, but if their side stopped attacking, victory grew distant.

Oliver made his choice, turning to his brother.

“…You’re up.”

“Got it.”

Gwyn pulled the instrument from his back, using his modified white wand as a bow, and began to play.

“I can go on all day! Toni■■us!”

Enrico made to cast another spell, but—his athame remained still. Frowning, he tried again.

“…Mm? ■■nitrus!”

There was a crackle, and it dissipated. The incantation was incomplete, and the second’s pause in his onslaught did not go unnoticed. Spells from both sides, limiting his retreat, and two circling ahead of his path, cut in. One slash caught a leg, severing it at the halfway point.

“Two down… Careless, Forghieri,” Oliver said. One step closer to check.

Now it was Enrico’s turn to figure out an unexpected attack. His eyes lit on Gwyn’s viola.

“Auditory spelljamming? And only affecting *my* voice. How deft!” he said. “Mr. Gwyn, to think I’d find *you* here.”

“Are your ears burning, Instructor Enrico?”

Named but undaunted, Gwyn had known full well his actions would identify him. Much like the late Carlos Whitrow’s enchanted voice, the enchanted music he played was a rare talent indeed. No one else at Kimberly could do it.

“Which naturally means that must be Ms. Shannon accompanying you. You’ve dragged the Sherwood siblings into this? That *is* shocking.”

Enrico’s eyes had gone from Gwyn to Shannon to the figure behind them. It seemed like the mad old man was finally wondering exactly who he was up against.

“You there, leader. Who might *you* be?”

“You’ll learn my name—at the moment of your death.”

Even as they spoke, the battle raged on. With two legs gone, the golem’s movements were notably less precise, and it was surrounded, buffeted by spells from all directions. Enrico was forced to put his nano golems back on defense. But that tactic had only been so effective because his alacrity had allowed him to evade the bulk of the spells. Now that he was soaking those head-on, he wouldn’t last long.

“Hmm, the tide seems to be against me,” Enrico muttered. “Best I change the premise.”

Oliver had been biding his chance to step in—but Enrico’s multipedal golem abruptly transformed. This was no mere minor alteration; the entire framework of it was reshaped like starting a clay pot anew.

“Don’t let him!”

Certain the fight could hinge on this, Oliver cast a spell of his own. His comrades joined him, throwing in everything they had. But—in response, the nano golems began to spin, forming a tornado-like barrier around Enrico, letting no spells pass through. This resistance required immense

mana from their operator and clearly could not last long—but it allowed the transformation within.

Of the remaining four legs, two became razor-sharp arms. The other two remained legs but thicker, sturdier ones. Enrico was encased in the torso, but it was now streamlined, anything extra stripped away. In less than a minute, what had been a multi-legged golem had transformed into a vicious looking exterior, somewhere between a man and a carnivorous beast. The overall size was greatly reduced, and it was less like Enrico was *riding* the golem than *wearing* it.

"All done! And ready for more."

Like drawing a breath, the new golem used the vents coating it to inhale all the nano golems, drawing them inside itself. As its defenses thinned, the spell barrage began to get through.

They had him now—or so they thought. But before the spells reached it, the golem jumped—rocketing upward.

"_____?!"

"Above us!"

Oliver's comrades raised their athames high, following the golem—but found no trace of it.

"Nope! I'm over here."

The voice came from right beside them, in the ear of a comrade—who immediately lost everything above the waist. Blood and guts spattered across the floor, a feat managed with a single sweep of the golem's arm. Another comrade flung himself at it—but his athame caught only air as the wind whistled through the hole in his belly.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Pardon me; that jab was a bit *too* strong!"

The golem's metal arms were covered in blood; Enrico laughed maniacally. Oliver clenched his jaw, eyes like daggers. Both comrades had escaped instant death, but neither could anyone stop to heal them properly. While the old man's attention was elsewhere, nearby comrades were stopping the bleeding and dragging them to the side, but nothing more.

The sight cut Oliver to the quick, but he forced himself to keep his focus honed on the enemy before him—on this new, as yet undefined threat.

"…A golem exoskeleton?"

"Oh? You've heard of it? You've done *your* homework."

The old man sounded impressed, but Oliver was well aware just how fringe this technology was. Not just the exoskeleton. This and the nano golems that had been tormenting them—these were all magitech that *should not yet exist*. Concepts that by all rights would be confined to theoretical papers.

"Isn't it *cool*? By having the nano golems circulate through the interior, I can make it both lightweight *and* high-output! The downside is that it compositionally doesn't allow much mana storage, so it's a huge drain on the operator's mana reserves. It works because *I'm* running it! Mages less blessed in the capacity department would dry up in *seconds*!"

The mad old man was living all on his own, a century in the future. As this thought struck him, Oliver was forced to put aside his own opinion of the man's character and face the truth—Enrico Forghieri was undoubtedly a genius.

"But it's not a bad prototype at all. It enhances a mage's physical prowess, completely negativing the sluggish response endemic to the golem arts. With the mana drain, spells above doublecants are rather a challenge, but in exchange—"

Enrico broke off, and the golem vanished from view. Two comrades sensed it approaching and swung their blades its way—but both of their dominant arms were torn off at the shoulder at exactly the same time.

"—it enables this *barbaric* fighting style! Isn't it just the *best*?"

Enrico brandished the severed limbs proudly, with the innocent cheer of a child showing off their new toy.

"I want a go with it, Instructor!" Karlie yelled, shoving the athameless pair to the side. Several others skilled in sword arts joined her, starting a close-range battle with Enrico in his exoskeleton cocoon. But he was more than twice as fast; he dodged every blow aimed at him, and the risk of friendly fire meant they couldn't risk flinging spells around. Even Karlie found herself barely able to avoid a fatal counter.

"……!"

This thing's specs were overwhelming. It was anybody's guess as to whether Godfrey would have stood a chance against it. They'd almost had Enrico in check—and he'd cleared the board again. As Oliver scrambled to figure out their next move, one comrade after another dodged too late and went down.

He turned to Shannon. "…Get it ready," he said. They couldn't afford to hold back here. Shannon knew why he'd given the order but still flinched.

"Not yet," Gwyn said, raising a hand. "Trust the upperclassmen."

His unshaken confidence settled Oliver's nerves. Oliver kept watching—and a moment later, a subtle shift occurred.

"…Mm?"

The sound of metal scraping could be heard. Enrico had failed to fully dodge an athame, letting out a quizzical grunt. More comrades pounced. Mere moments earlier he'd been running circles around them, but more and more of their blows were getting through. They were adapting to fighting this thing—but that wasn't the *only* reason.

"…It's slowing down?"

Hovering around the outskirts, it was obvious even to his eye. The exoskeleton was clearly not maintaining its initial speed. Like it was shouldering heavy baggage, each move it took grew steadily heavier.

"F-finally k-kicking in. You've b-been too sloppy, Instructor Enrico."

A gloomy voice echoed over the battlefield. The old man turned toward it.

"Mr. Dufourcq! One of your curses, I assume?"

“Lead turtles. A th-thousandfold. H-heavy even for you.”

Oliver squinted and could just make out shadows swarming the exoskeleton golem. A curse of encumbrance. In accordance with the law of curse conservation, Robert had scattered tiny camouflaged cursed items on the floor, mingled with the obstacles his comrades had laid down. Enrico had been treading on these since the battle began, unawares. Without the golem’s weight, the shells wouldn’t break—so his comrades were at no risk of infection. And the clincher was the curse effect latency caused by the delayed activation formula. Each curse he’d trod upon was kicking in, weighing the old man down.

“**Colligationem.** Let’s see if you can dodge the next one, Instructor.”

Karlie piled on a binding spell, and Enrico’s legs paused for just a moment—

“”””””””Frigus!”””””””””

“”””””””Magnus Flamma!”””””””””

—but nonetheless a moment long enough to turn the tide. A singlecant to pin him, and a focus-fired doublecant—the same strategy they’d stuck to from the start, but here at last it achieved results. With the nano golems absorbed into the exoskeleton, he could no longer block the spells. The moment he no longer had the mobility to dodge, the exoskeleton was done for.

“Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wonderful! Simply wonderful, children!”

Just before the barrage of spells wrecked the golem, the air was filled with flashes and explosions. And in the instant their eyes were blinded, Enrico detached the torso from the limbs, rocketing himself upward.

“After him!” Oliver yelled.

Was he ejecting the nano golems like propellant? The exoskeleton’s torso had the old man flying at broom-like speeds into the depths of the helicoid hall. The students had a barrier up to prevent escape, but Enrico hurtled right at it. The battle so far had drastically reduced the number of people who could intercept him.

“Good barrier! But not quite thick enough!”

Enrico started spinning like a drill, forcing his way through the barrier. It took a good five seconds to break it, but the surviving framework was still sturdy enough to weather that long a barrage. On the other side it began falling off, and he hit the floor—the impact of that finally destroying it for good. Fully exposed, Enrico scrambled to his feet.

“Kya-ha?!”

With no warning at all, a blade shot right toward his heart. Enrico’s athame struck it almost purely on instinct. The deflected blow gouged deep into his side—the first blood he’d shed since the battle began.

“You’re—” He blinked. The covert operative leaped safely away. Teresa Carste had been on standby outside the barrier from the start, in case he attempted to flee. But even with the element of surprise, her blade had not managed to claim his life.

“Kya-ha… Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Enrico tore his eyes off the girl and raced down the helicoid hall, peals of laughter echoing in his wake. He had more ball rollers embedded in the soles of his shoes and was swiftly gaining distance. Oliver’s comrades took the barrier down and were forced to give chase on broomback, Teresa among them.

“…I failed to finish him,” she said. “I have no excuse.”

“No, you did good,” Oliver told her. “Don’t let him get away! He’s injured!”

An injury like that made all the difference. Certain of that, he and his comrades shot after Enrico at top speed.

Broomriding students were hot on his heels. Enrico could feel the hostility; they would not be easily dissuaded. He bounded down the helicoid halls as fast as his feet could carry him.

“Kya-ha-ha-ha! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha…!”

Spells aimed at his back pelted the air like rain, forcing him to dodge or fire oppositional spells to cancel them out. On even terrain like this, ball roller boots’ top speed was a match for any broom. He could keep his distance for the length of this tunnel, at least.

But he’d lost both his main golem and the nanos. The students’ plan had been a clever one, a real threat to him, and the sheer depths of their brilliance was causing explosions of joy.

“This! *This* is what makes being a teacher *worthwhile*!”

Enrico was delighted. Becoming a teacher was the right choice. Even with a flock of students out for his blood, he was having *fun*.

Oliver’s team raced down the multi-mile tubular passage. As they neared the end, they could feel the air changing on their skins. Where the library layer had been quite comfortable, the air here was hot and dry.

“Careful! Fifth layer coming up!”

They cleared the tunnel exit, and the fifth layer spread out before them—Firedrake Canyon. Undulating rocks, a deep ravine, and winged shadows soaring through the space between. The titular canyon was like a maze branching in all directions, and many a dragon nested in its walls. Most breeds were as aggressive as they were powerful; getting through here required the proper strength to fight one’s way past them.

“Don’t engage the dragons!”

“Focus only on Enrico!”

The comrades in the lead barked orders. These weren’t bird wyverns like the second layer; these skies were ruled by *real* wyverns, all with the proportionate size, flight skills, and ferocity. An inexperienced student lost down here could easily be burned to a crisp in a single breath.

But this environment wasn’t enough to make any member of this group balk. They broke through the waiting wyverns with suppressing fire and mobility, eyes on Enrico as he slid down the ravine’s sides on his ball roller boots. If he’d merely jumped down, they’d have hit him in the air, so he kept

his feet grounded. Spells were raining down upon him, but despite the sheer rock face, he was still proving fully capable of evading everything coming his way.

“”””””””Tonitrus!”””””””””

But as he reached the canyon floor, the old man’s route was cut off. He was trapped with his back to the wall, students landing in all directions, pelting him with spells. Enrico threw up a barrier spell and held fast, but this was clearly but a momentary respite.

“You’ve chosen this as your grave, Forghieri.”

This time they really had him in check. No more nano golems, and even if he tried generating more from the ground around him, their spells would incinerate him first. The next doublecant volley would punch right through the old man’s barrier.

“…Do it!” Oliver yelled.

“”””””””Magnus Flamma!”””””””””

Magic lights fired from twenty-one athames, all bound for Enrico…

“I don’t think so,” came the mad old man’s voice. *“Behold.”*

…but a massive hand broke free of the rocks, slipping between them and the old man.

“Wha—?”

Massive wrists, arms, and shoulders emerged from the tumbling rock face. A torso the size of the irminsul’s trunk, eyes burning with enmity. Every inch of the three-hundred-foot colossus was covered in adamant plating. And worst of all—the drumbeat of life echoed within.

“Noll!”

“Your Majesty, get back!”

Shannon yanked Oliver away, putting him behind her. Karlie and the front line were gaping up at the giant.

“I can hardly leave this lying about, can I? After that fight, serving up any old golems would hardly be a fitting reward!”

Enrico was perched on the golem’s shoulder, far above the ground. A sight that should not be—the worst imaginable outcome.

Oliver gritted his teeth. “…Dea Ex Machina.”

The giant living golem he’d seen in the man’s workshop. That one had been missing the lower half but had certainly made an impression. It was the last thing he ever wanted to fight. Choosing a battleground far from that workshop had been mandatory, and this location was supposed to fit the bill.

“…You made *two*.”

But there had always been the potential for something to throw a wrench in their plans: the existence of a second living golem.

“You knew about it? I did show it to a few promising students,” Enrico said, seeing they were aware of the concept. “But I must make one correction! This is *Deus* Ex Machina. Look closely—this is not the incomplete goddess you know. This one’s form is masculine!”

The old man was pointing down the machine god's length. Certainly, this golem's skeletal structure was more robust, without the slimmer portions Oliver remembered.

"Deus here was the first variant of the concept to reach completion. The Dea I showed off was the second, still mid-construction. Well? Nifty little invention, isn't it?"

Enrico beamed down at the students. They gulped, staring up at it…and then felt a rumble from underfoot. They quickly looked around and saw a massive four-legged dragon charging through the canyon toward them, easily three hundred feet long, with scales like boulders. Had it not been moving, they could well have mistaken it for part of the terrain.

"…Lindwurm coming," Gwyn muttered.

Fighting these head-on was a nightmare, so most students passing through here dedicated themselves to avoiding its notice. But…

"Oh, don't spoil the party. Go on, get!"

Enrico had his machine god, and was not like most people. He hopped into the control seat in the head and stood before the charging dragon.

"GRRRAAAAAAAAAGHHHHH!"

Furious at this violation of its territory, the dragon let out an ear-shattering bellow. Its charge was capable of toppling mountains—but the machine god caught it with two hands, not sliding back a single step.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The machine god grabbed the dragon's neck with one hand and swung it around like a toy. Oliver watched in awe, unable to step in. This was a sight like no other. Lindwurms were the apex of all magical ecosystems, and this one was helpless before the golem. Their sizes were similar, but their power was not.

"Whoops, not supposed to kill it," Enrico muttered. "It would disrupt the whole ecosystem here!"

The dragon was already unconscious and foaming at the mouth, so he simply tossed it away. The fifth layer's overlord slid across the canyon floor and did not get up. In the Deus's driver's seat, Enrico turned his eyes from the lindwurm to the wyverns wheeling overhead.

"There are far too many of you. Let's thin your numbers a tad. **Spiritale!**"

The golem's raised hands fired a beam of purple light from the tips. Any wyvern unlucky enough to be caught in the light was instantly incinerated. A few breathed fire back, but Enrico ignored this entirely, thinning the wyvern numbers like he was swatting mosquitoes.

"Hmm, mana packing efficiency at less than ten percent."

As wyverns fled, Enrico waggled the machine god's fingers, checking the functions.

“Hardly peak performance, but it is an emergency activation during maintenance. Fuel reserves are inadequate, but nothing to be done about that.”

These checks complete, the golem’s massive bulk turned with surprising ease, facing Oliver and his comrades. It lorded over them, making everyone flinch. The relentless pressure was no longer directed at the lindwurm or the wyverns, but at them.

“Shall we go on, children? How are you going to kill me now? It’s only right that you do so by overcoming my greatest invention!”

He was clearly champing at the bit. The students, meanwhile, didn’t move. All of them had yet to falter in their attacks, but now they were frozen stiff. They were at a loss. How could they fight this monster? How could they avoid being decimated within the next minute?

Despite everything they’d achieved so far, Oliver’s comrades were back at square one. The multi-legged golem on ball rollers, the nano golems, the exoskeleton—they’d racked their brains and overcome them all, only to find this nightmare looming above them. Deus Ex Machina, the most horrifying thing imaginable.

“Ha-ha.”

But despite all that, Oliver alone…was laughing.

“*Right?* You dare talk about what’s *right*?”

The laugh tore out of him like he couldn’t endure it otherwise. His nearby comrades stared wide-eyed with alarm.

“Please, Forghieri. Don’t go acting like you have principles. An animal like you who’s betrayed and turned on his own student has long since lost that privilege.”

He glared up at the machine god. All seemed lost, yet the fight had not yet left him—he was here to kill this man.

“You will die like a dog. Like an insect. Like the trash you are. A fate more miserable than those of the countless lives you’ve trifled with. That is the *right* way for you to die.”

He took a step forward, athame brandished at his side. Then he called over his shoulder to Gwyn and Shannon.

“Do it.”

“…!”

Shannon shook her head. A refusal far more adamant than she was ordinarily capable of. Fully aware of why she was so reluctant, Oliver commanded her again, his voice like steel.

“That was an order from your lord. Release the seal, Shannon Sherwood!”

He spoke to her not as his sister but as his vassal. She looked ready to burst into tears, but Gwyn put his hand on her shoulder.

“……Shannon.”

His voice said it all. This was the only option left.

“……”

And it forced her to act, knowing this would put her cousin through hellish suffering.

“…Duaedetroni.”

Her mind made up, Shannon raised her white wand, chanting. As he heard the words, Oliver felt a familiar presence join him. A great and powerful soul, using him as a temporary solace.

“Misce, misce.”

“……Ah……”

It overlapped with Oliver’s soul, merging with it. Pouring into him like molten gold.

“ _____ kk _____ ”

Dizzying heat, pain racking his body. Every ounce of his flesh rejecting the invasion, resisting, trying to force it out. This response was a defense mechanism, one Oliver had to override with inflexible willpower. That intractable contradiction caused yet more pain—yet that, too, was but a taste of what lay in store.

“ _____ AH _____ ah _____ ”

In accordance with the golden flow, the change advanced from his soul to his etheric body, from there unto his flesh. The flow of mana expanded and accelerated, rebuilding his very bones, causing an eruption of hurt a hundred times that of growing pains. An orchestra of maddening torment that the boy squashed with incessant loathing for the enemy at hand.

“ _____ A _____ A _____ ”

He embraced the pain, like a cup of hemlock willingly downed. From the depths of his melting reason rose an ironic relief. This was an apt punishment for defiling his mother’s soul.

The blood vessels in his eyes were ripping open. Crimson tears flowed from both eyes, flowing down over his mask and onto his cheeks below.

“ _____ GAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

With a howl, he hurtled himself into the air. The broom on his back was quick to react and took flight, catching his feet atop its back.

Aboard the sprinting broom, Oliver assumed a stance, turned right, hand low. A heretical form found in none of the three core sword art styles—but one he’d shown a hint of before, when dueling Nanao.

Chloe style, unleashed.

Arts once lost, now reborn. By swallowing the soul of a genius, the boy became a comet, trailing tears of blood in his wake as he shot toward the machine god.

“Gladio!”

He swung his athame in passing. The impact of the severing spell struck the machine god’s shoulder, and shards of torn-off adamant fell through the air.

“You broke through the armor with a singlecant?!” Enrico gasped.

Behind the giant, Oliver wheeled around, coming back in. The machine god swung its arms to swat him out of the sky, but he evaded this with

daredevil maneuvers and dove beneath the arm, raking the torso’s side with a doublecant severing spell. A metallic screech assaulted everyone’s ears, and once again, a deep gash appeared in the armor.

"…An adamant-piercing Gladio."

The mad old man's voice had dropped deep and low.

The machine god's palms went out, aimed at Oliver's trajectory. The same purple light that had decimated the wyverns now became a barrage of shots peppering the vicinity. The blasts were far too dense to evade, no matter how good you were with a broom.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

But faced with that unavoidable bombardment, Oliver leaped off his broom. Freed from his weight, the broom easily slipped safely through the gaps, and Oliver stepped on the air itself, dashing in three dimensions through the onslaught. A few steps later, the broom wheeled back, and his feet landed on it once more.

"…Acrobatic broom tricks mixed with Sky Walking…"

All these moves defied magical combat de rigueur, making the word *masterful* seem like an understatement. But the old man had seen them all before.

"Who taught you to fight like that?" Enrico demanded.

In lieu of an answer, Oliver fired a severing spell at the machine god's head. It used its arms as shields, weathering the strike as Enrico remained fixated on deciphering the situation.

"…No. Nobody did. Even if she personally trained you, they're not moves you can *imitate*. Moreover—how are those absurd maneuvers not tearing your body apart?!"

Flying a broom at impossible speeds, pausing only to dash across the air well beyond the limits of what Sky Walking could do. These maneuvers were beyond what even *mages* should be capable of. Forcibly turning that hard would crush your organs. Enrico had seen someone prove him wrong on that before.

"…Mm—"

But there was one clear difference here. The red stream of blood left in the boy's wake was no longer mere tears. Blood was pouring from every inch of his body, his long-since-sodden robe unable to soak up any more. Enrico tweaked his observations accordingly.

"…They *are* tearing you apart. Yet, you are healing in tandem. Maintaining a healing spell to match the toll on your physique? Who is…? Where? How?"

Successive impossibilities should long since have destroyed him, yet someone's healing was keeping that at bay. Enrico could tell that much, but he had no clue who was capable of that or how they were pulling it off. It was clearly beyond the boy himself, but the distance was too great for his comrades to be offering remote support. Healing was a delicate art to begin with, generally requiring the finesse afforded only within the range of spatial magic. It couldn't be done to someone performing mid-aerial maneuvers.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

But reality refuted that theory. Damaged but not downed, the boy’s aerial display continued unabated. His crimson-stained eyes gleamed with hellish hostility, and Enrico felt a chill he had not felt in years—and this sensation, too, gave him pleasure.

“…What a thrill! So many mysteries…!”

His bleeding eyes left his vision stained red. Bottomless pain and loathing strobed in and out of his mind.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Heat like molten lava was running through his veins. Oliver fought like the embodiment of hell on earth.

The word *pain* had long since ceased to have meaning. His body shattered, his soul splintering; there was no part of him that didn’t hurt, no moment of relief. All five senses merged into the agony, and external information was carried to him on waves of torment. And that’s what made this so essential. Just as Deus Ex Machina was fueled by a curse, he was running on *pain*.

Spell light fired from the machine god’s fingers. A single hit would evaporate his flesh, forcing him to dance across the sky heedless of inertia. The enormous strain ripped the flesh from his extremities, but every wound was healed within moments. It was like a punishment. He was a damned soul not even allowed the privilege of an end.

As it should be, the boy thought. *As it* has *to be*. He laughed. There were *two* indelible sinners here. And he had never dared dream that one might be spared from torment.

Oliver was going solo against Deus Ex Machina, fighting like nothing in this world. Feeble attempts at support seemed liable to undermine that, and his comrades below were unsure what to do.

“Where do we aim?!”

“The joins! Armor’s too thick elsewhere!”

“Anyone think they can punch through adamant?!”

“At point-blank range, sure! Someone back me!”

“Wait, no reckless charges! If we can’t get to Enrico himself—”

Even battle-hardened upperclassmen were left in disarray. Frustrated by their lack of options, some comrades broke away from the pack, hopping on their brooms, determined not to let their young lord fight alone.

But their actions didn’t go unnoticed. They were barely in the air before a purple light swept toward them from the machine god’s palms.

“Ah—”

“Crap—!”

Realizing their blunder, their faces blanched. When taking flight, you had to hit a set speed before evasion was possible. And that left them fatally exposed, helpless to avoid bathing in that merciless purple light.

“Extruditor!”

Oliver slipped in a spell and a hand, saving his two comrades from death by a hairbreadth.

“Huh…?”

“L-Lord…?”

He’d knocked one away with a spell and dragged the other by their collar. All of them *just* managed to get outside the kill zone in time. Leaving them stunned, the boy was back on his broom, rocketing skyward.

“ _____ GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

He roared for Enrico’s undivided attention. Comrades safe behind him, he took on the terrifying machine god all on his own. They were no longer protecting that boy; he was protecting *them*.

“Dammit, Gwyn!” Karlie roared. “What the hell was that?! What’s he thinking, stepping in to save anyone?! One false move, and we’d have lost our king!”

“…I doubt Noll is capable of *thinking*,” Gwyn said, his bow wand never pausing. The tones he put out were a mess, betraying the emotional toll that putting his cousin in harm’s way took on him. But he couldn’t afford to stop. The enchanted healing music was the only thing easing Oliver’s suffering.

“He’s fused with the soul of Chloe Halford, the mage of the millennium. It was sheer luck that his body didn’t explode on the first attempt, and it’s honestly a miracle that he’s still fighting. He’s got no room left for logic.”

Harboring his mother’s soul—to Oliver, this was like putting a lion’s heart inside a mouse. It *could not* fit; it could *only* tear him apart. Even if it was somehow forced inside, a single beat would cause a rush of blood so powerful his flesh would explode.

“Even a momentary fusion is risky. And right now, he’s *maintaining* it, even as he fights. That’s not a sane act. Regardless of the foundation he’s built from repeated prior fusions…”

Gwyn knew what a titanic feat this was better than anyone but the boy himself. As a mage of the Sherwood clan—their eldest son—this was a hand fate should have dealt to him first.

“I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t handle the pain for even a single second.”

And he would never forget the sin of forcing his burden onto his cousin.

“Sanavulnera… Sanavulnera… Sanavulnera…!”

In Gwyn’s shadow, Shannon was casting healing magic through her tears. This was keeping her cousin’s body intact, yet also torturing him with ceaseless pain. Rapid healing went hand-in-hand with recovery pain. The wounds themselves hurt, and so did the repairs to them—Oliver was fighting while buffeted by both at once. And the pain Gwyn mentioned, the one brought by Chloe’s soul—that was yet a third source of suffering.

Karlie looked at the siblings, then at Oliver above, catching up on just how bad all this was.

“He’s not capable of thought…?” she asked. “Hang on—then why would he protect us? He’s basically in a trance! He shouldn’t be capable of protecting his pawns…”

Unable to find a reason why he'd have stepped in, Karlie was at a loss. But in Gwyn's mind, the answer was obvious. Even as he played his instrument, he put it into words.

"It's the other way around. Without the constraints of his rational mind, Noll is incapable of abandoning anyone. Even with his mother's killer before him, even with his body racked by pain."

Gwyn bit his lip, and a drop of blood ran down his chin. It wasn't nearly painful enough, but without it he could not stay sane. He couldn't let his cousin suffer alone.

"…Deep down, he's just *nice*. Incorrigibly kindhearted…!"

His voice was an anguished cry. And the emotion in it was what allowed Karlie and her brethren to fully understand who their lord really was, what kind of person she'd allowed to lead her into war.

"…Holy…shit…!" Karlie swore, emotions boiling up inside: shame, inadequacy, and something beyond both she did not have a word for. And not just her; the other comrades were shaking as mana raged within them. They resisted the urge to leap right into the fray, holding themselves in check, eyes on the battle above.

"…How long does it last?" Karlie asked.

"We've never tried longer than two minutes," Gwyn growled.

That clinched it for everyone. Their lord was carving his own life to ribbons, buying them time—time to come up with a plan worth what he was putting himself through.

Up in the machine god's driver's seat, Enrico had already ceased to see these students as a threat, his enthusiasm entirely directed to Oliver alone. He found his opponent's inexplicable strength and the mechanism behind it deeply fascinating.

"…I think I'm starting to piece it together. Still a lot of guesswork, though."

He'd made enough observations to voice a hypothesis.

"Her soul lies within you, yes?" he said, certain that much was true. "The soul of Chloe Two-Blade Halford herself."

Oliver was past responding. His very bones creaked from the speed of his broom. He ducked beneath the golem's mighty swing, doggedly aiming for Enrico's perch before chiseling away at the armor with yet another severing spell.

The mad old man paid him no heed. He just kept musing away.

"A soul merge! I was aware of the theory but have never seen it in practice before. I heard only two demi species in history have ever pulled it off! To blend another's soul with your own, making their nature and experience yours… What a feat! We have scarcely any method of directly observing the soul, leaving soulology a sadly nascent field, so I have no way of *proving* this, but…"

Successes in an unobservable domain had results in an observable one. That, too, was commonplace where mages operated. And it allowed Enrico to narrow down what must be happening within his opponent.

"But once I eliminate the alternatives, a soul merge is the one remaining option. Chloe's sword arts were hers and hers alone. Even Garland could only learn a fraction of the whole and proved unable to copy her fighting style in any measurable way."

A particularly strong slash struck the golem's hand, slicing off a finger. Enrico remained unperturbed. Indeed, he seemed impressed by how smooth the cut was. A spell indifferent to the hardness of adamant—was it severing the bonds between matter at a micro level, or was it just yet another testament to Chloe Halford's superiority?

"A once-in-a-generation ability, one that cannot be passed on through blood or education—we mages call that a soul skill. And Chloe had more soul skills than any other. There is but one way to obtain them—if you have access to that very soul. As you and the headmistress do."

When the seven of them had taken Chloe Halford down, the headmistress had absorbed her soul. That was her role—that, and the surprise betrayal.

But the sight before him contradicted what he knew—and led him to a different conclusion.

"On the night in question, the headmistress didn't manage to steal *all* of Chloe's soul, I see. A portion of it escaped her clutches and made its way to you. That's the only explanation."

Enrico was sure of that. He didn't understand how that worked, but a portion of Chloe Halford's soul *must* have split away and was here inside his foe, allowing this boy to use her arts against Enrico.

And having reached that conclusion, the instructor drew a deep breath.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

His laugh tore up from the diaphragm as if trying to drown out his opponent's murderous roar.

"Compare us to the demis, and you shall see! Humans—are creatures of individuality!"

The mad old man was yelling now, to a foe who seemed unlikely to be capable of conversation. Yet, he raised his voice to make his words reach home—nay, hit home.

"That is *especially* true for mages! The art of the soul merge is fundamentally not *for* us! The stress of two souls melding must be beyond imagining! The headmistress is managing to dominate the soul she stole, but even a witch like her is left with chronic headaches!"

Oliver didn't need to be told this. He knew how impossible this feat was. Even as they spoke, he shed blood, stifled his agony, and groaned under the strain. These sensations were telling him that same thing. But he didn't

listen. If he paid them the slightest heed, the spell would break. And he knew that would leave him unable to lift a single finger.

“Meanwhile, what you’re doing is far more demanding! The vessel of your flesh cannot match the soul skill! Each move you make destroys you, necessitating constant healing!”

Accurate. Oliver’s body was only in one piece because his cousin’s healing was faster than his physical collapse. Without her support he would have been long since rent asunder. He’d lost count of how many times his tendons had snapped in this fight alone.

“Humans can receive only a finite amount of healing in one lifetime. I’m sure you know that! How much of your total lifespan are you sacrificing for each minute you fight like this?!”

The old man’s words called forth a memory. At the back of Oliver’s mind was a step on the road to what he now was.

“Feel that? You’re starting to hit that wall.”

On all fours in a cold cellar, Oliver listened to the even colder sound of his father’s voice. For fifteen hours straight, they’d been training, leaving every inch of his body in pain. Oliver had lost track of how many bones he’d broken or how many times he’d passed out. Liberal use of medical treatment and potions forced his recovery, but that was proving to be increasingly fruitless to get him moving again.

“…Kah… Hah…”

“That’s the limit of your talent. Obtaining any techniques above your level will take ages, or prove entirely impossible. Only the truly gifted can overcome that wall. And I’m afraid you have no such talent.”

Even with his son on the brink of death, his father’s tone stayed flat. No trace of any emotion. The purpose of this attempt was to break his son’s body and mind; they had no use for feelings here.

“Physical growth and experience can supplement it to a degree, but that won’t be nearly enough. Each of your targets are *real* talents,” he told Oliver. “That’s where Chloe Halford’s soul comes in. Inputting the experience of a genius—experience you could never hope to reach—will allow you to break through this wall and nothing more. That is, of course… only if you can withstand the soul merge.”

Too tired and hurting to speak, Oliver still somehow managed to grasp his father’s words. Thought alone must never be abandoned. The cessation of thought meant the loss of all meaning. If meaning was lost, then the pain to come would be unendurable.

“Do you know why we hurt you to your limits before we attempt a fusion? Because we require your soul to feel the *need*. To convince it that you flesh will not survive otherwise,” his father explained. “Human souls are fundamentally not capable of accepting outside input. The shells of our selves are very hard and can only be changed via the filter of our own experiences. That remains true even with the soul-sucking progenitor

power. But if we meet a number of conditions, that can change. And one of those involves weakening the soul's resistance to the merger."

The voice droned on, no variation to it. All the training and pain so far had merely been preparations for the real goal. Oliver felt a cold wave of fear—fear he'd thought long since paralyzed. He couldn't begin to fathom it. Suffering greater than this? How was that even possible?

"The pain will be unimaginable. There is no guarantee you'll endure it. When you are ready, say the word."

He offered no smidgen of reassurance, merely a promise of a future filled with agony. And his father was well aware how merciless it was to demand a decision from him here.

"…Will…?"

Oliver feebly tried to string the words together. He hadn't spoken in hours, and now that he did, it was not to voice his own suffering but to ask an urgent question.

"…Will it hurt…Mom…?"

"……!"

All this time, his father had kept that mask of indifference over his heart, but these words caused its facade to crack. His nails dug into his quivering cheeks, stilling them. Between those fingers, Oliver caught the briefest glimpse of the man his father once was. Of the time when Oliver had been happy.

"…A being that exists only as a soul does not have a conscious mind like the living. Only when the body, ether, and soul are assembled does the mind truly function. Chloe is not capable of feeling the pain you do."

This was the first and only respite Oliver had been granted since this training began. A small hint of relief amid the pain he'd been through and had yet to experience, none of which would reach his mother.

"Put that unneeded concern out of your mind. Focus, else your personality will be lost on the first attempt."

The man aimed his white wand at the room's sole door, calling, "Come in, Shannon." Opened with a spell, the girl plastered to the door this whole time came tumbling into the cellar: Shannon Sherwood, her eyes red with tears.

"Noll!"

Seeing her cousin barely breathing, Shannon scrambled over to him, wrapping her arms tight around his frame. The corners of his lips twitched. He could barely feel anything but pain, but her warmth pushed through. He could feel her love for him.

"Do it. You're from the main line; you know far better than I do that this is the duty our lineage demands."

And his father was already snatching away that small comfort. Oliver knew that was for his benefit. If he was allowed a rest here, if the thread of tension snapped, then he could never endure the pain to come.

"…Do it…Sister…"

And so he sought it himself. So that his gentle sister—who felt the pain of others so deeply—would blame herself less. So that all this pain would be his and his alone.

And Shannon got that, too. She hesitated for a long, long moment, then wiped her tears and drew her wand. There was never a choice. This was a burden carried by blood, and from the moment of her birth, she was at the heart of this.

“…Duaedetroni… Misce, misce…”

Her voice shook as she chanted, and something massive flowed into Oliver. Like the fate of a ceramic dish into which lava has been poured. The first crack in his soul.

“ _____ !!!!!!!”

The first instant evaporated all the pain he’d felt so far. It was *so* much worse. Like he was losing the essence of himself, a sensation that could not be contained within concepts like pain or suffering. His body’s rejection was extreme, surpassing the rotary limits of his joints, and his father and Shannon were desperately holding him down, lest he destroy himself by his own hand.

“Noll… Noll…!”

Shannon had already finished the soul merge on her end. Only a portion of Chloe’s soul had poured into Oliver, a mere drop mingled with him. But that was already a fatal dosage.

“You see now? This is the torment brought by an invasive soul.”

What seemed eternal was but a few minutes. The self-destructive rejection began to subside. The hyperventilation died down, but it took a few more minutes before the light of reason returned to Oliver’s eyes. Seeing that his son had *not* died, his father spoke again.

“A minuscule degree of her experience has flowed into you. Experience by a master you could never hope to match through mere training. But that is not yet *your* experience.”

He pulled a small bottle from his pocket and poured the contents into Oliver’s mouth. Oliver swallowed, and the liquid slid down his throat. The resulting heat spread to all corners of his body like a fever. An elixir so pure it was said it could wake someone from death’s door.

“Only by making use of that experience will your soul accept it. And this *must* take place immediately after the soul merge. Like hammering iron while it’s hot.”

His father stood up, moving to the center of the room.

“Draw your blade. We’ve got more training to do.”

His athame was at the ready. His son had endured a lifetime of pain to body and soul, and he planned to fight him more.

The first to move was not Oliver but Shannon. She pointed her white wand at the man, hiding her cousin behind her. A girl who never picked a fight herself—this might well be the first time she ever had.

“…Let Noll…rest…!”

“That will make this all for nothing.”

And he cut her courage down with a single line. Seeing this, Oliver forced his leaden body to move. It took several tries, but at last he was on his feet.

“…Thank you…,” he whispered.

Oliver took her hand, pulling her aside, facing his father in her stead. Seeing his son’s quivering arms raise his athame, the man nodded.

“Good. That’s how it should be. Unless you swallow the pain, we will get nowhere,” he told his son. “And we’ll repeat this process more times than you can count.”

Oliver knew that. He’d never once desired to reject it.

This had never been forced upon him. This suffering was not at his father’s command. By his own free will, he had inherited his mother’s intent, sworn revenge, and sought the power that lay within her soul.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Burning his life away on a broom, striking the machine god with an athame wet with his own blood. Fending off the attack, the mad old man fought back with words.

“It’s like—your soul is a chimera. To accept the outstanding soul of one Chloe Halford, you were forced to warp the very core of your being!”

“Gladiooooooooo!”

His severing spell gouged the armor on the arm as if trying to drown out a voice he detested. Oliver swore he’d cut it off next time, his broom turning in the air and charging back in.

“That is not hard work—it’s self-abuse! To let her soul in, to recreate her skills postmortem in an average body—you must have torn apart your body, ether, and soul, time and time again!”

In the corner of his mind, Oliver admitted it. He had done just that. To gain the power needed to take down the seven, to borrow a fraction of his mother’s soul, his innate mediocrity had left him no other choice. Even if that meant a fatal distortion to who he had once been.

“The effort to better yourself is unquestionably admirable! But what you have accumulated is torture and abuse, the denial of self! And that is nothing but pain and futility,” said Enrico. “Alterations to the soul have an irreversible effect on the personality! The price of learning to fight like her has cost you more than your lifespan alone! You *must* have sacrificed something far more essential!”

The mad old man was relentless. Forcing him to look at what he’d cast aside, what he’d thrown into the furnace to obtain this strength. Oliver’s jaw clenched so hard his teeth cracked.

“I’m sure you know what! There must be something you could once do but no longer can, no matter how you try! A gaping hole left behind!”

And Enrico’s words forced him to look inward. To remember how he’d been before he did this to himself. He knew it was meaningless but did not

fight it. It was a scream from the soul forced through irrevocable alterations, a loss he could not bring himself to let go of.

I give! Mercy, please! My sides are killing me!

Oh, my son. Noll! You are so good at making people laugh!

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Tears of blood flowed without end. A frigid wind whistled through the hole in his heart. Even his loathing felt like salvation. Using that to fuel his sword arm was the only warmth he had left.

He had no lack of fuel. Oliver had hatred and loathing without end. This man had put an end to his mother's laughter, triggering a change that continued until nothing of him was left.

"And the saddest part of all?" Enrico said. "You've done all that, yet come nowhere close to replacing her."

His tone had suddenly grown still, and that dug far deeper than any attempt to rile Oliver up.

"You know that better than anyone. You're nothing alike. You've forced yourself and forced yourself and copied but a fraction of her arts—but the real one was never…*this*."

Enrico knew the genuine article, and it was all too obvious. The blinding light of Chloe Halford's blades, that unparalleled beauty—the sight would never leave him.

And in light of those memories, this foe was clearly but a pale imitation. However close the forms matched, even if they were copies from the original's soul—the arts this boy delivered were not *her* sword. Merely a shadow with her shape, cast by the light of Chloe Halford.

"Up against Gnostics, up against tír gods, even up against me on her last night—she was always herself. Laughing, crying, raging, or sympathizing as her emotions drove her, swinging her blades as an expression of that. Ruled by no logic, consumed by no spell, she lived on her terms, as Chloe Halford and no one else. Her sword was always *free*."

True, Oliver admitted. No other master had been able to match his mother's style because it derived so wholly from her own personality. Things every other mage cast into the mud early on she had miraculously kept with her. That's why she captivated everyone. Inspired them to be like her, lit a fire under them. Like the one under him now.

"*That* is what your blade lacks most. What you cannot obtain no matter how hard you try. Precisely *because* you denied yourself time and time again to let Chloe's soul in. You would not allow yourself to *be* yourself. The worst of all the restrictions humans place upon themselves! The furthest thing imaginable from Chloe's way of life!"

Each of Enrico's words was like a knife piercing through him. *Shut up already*, Oliver's soul screamed. *I know all this. I don't need* you *telling me. I know better than anyone!*

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

He flipped in midair and came back in swinging. But as he turned, his body was yanked downward, hard.

“ _____ ?!”

“…Mm?”

Caught off guard, Oliver plummeted—then two arms reached out and caught him, like he’d fallen during broomsports.

“Don’t be mean to our king, Instructor Enrico.”

Karlie’s face was right by his, her arms around him. He struggled, trying to get back into the fight.

“GA _____ A _____ !”

“Okay, take a breath. There, there.”

Even as she soothed her lord, Karlie shifted to a grapple hold, keeping him still. Seen up this close, he was a fright. Blood oozing from torn veins left every inch of him crimson. Impossible movements had broken every bone in his body, and the rapid healing had connected them all wrong. Less than two minutes of combat had left his body seconds from total annihilation.

“…Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! Pardon me. I may have gotten a *tad* carried away!”

Enrico did sound mildly repentant. Confronted with the lingering scent of his former student, Chloe Halford, he had not exactly been his usual self. Realizing that, he switched back to his teaching voice, addressing the students below.

“Just to be clear, I will accept your surrender. Rebellion against Kimberly is among the most dire crimes in this world, but if I speak to the headmistress, there may well be some wiggle room. Perhaps not all of you will die! And I *would* like to credit your hard work.”

A magnanimous gesture, from a mad old man certain of his superior position. Karlie glanced up at him, then leaned in to her injured lord’s ear.

“What say you, Your Majesty?”

The decision was his. And the question—once again, brought forth memories held within his mother’s soul.

“…I’d take an alien god any day.”

The man’s voice oozed contempt. Chunks of his body had turned to translucent crystal, his arms turned to flintlike blades—but he was no longer capable of swinging them. Everything below the waist had been mercilessly shattered.

The bodies of the man’s comrades lay all around in pieces. The boon provided by the tír god crushed, the man’s own life flickering like a candle before Chloe.

“…Magic, my ass. To hell with mages. All you people do is toy with lives, chasing after *madness*.”

Chloe spoke not a word. Given the events leading up to this, she was disinclined to argue with his spite.

The Lantshire mages had blown an experiment on curses, tainting the surrounding land. Breaking the curse quickly had proved impossible and

left thousands trapped. The area was under strict quarantine, and faced with a slow and inevitable death, they had turned to their last resort, praying to a tír god, becoming Gnostics—and the Gnostic Hunters had been ordered to dispose of them. The man before her was the lone survivor.

"…Go on, burn me. That won't end a damn thing. Not in the least!"

His last words were a prophecy—one Chloe would later discover had been all too true.

"Please, let me go…"

For every vicious condemnation she heard, there was a plea. And those beat Chloe down more than any monster's roar.

A trembling woman sat in a basement nook, cradling a nursing baby in arms as frail as withered branches. That alone told Chloe everything she needed to know. Impoverished folk wandering until a group of Gnostics took them in—all too typical.

For better or worse, magical society had made pursuit of sorcery its sole priority. Other concerns—like welfare programs—were seen as comparatively trivial. The result was that the lower income ordinaries were abandoned to their fates, and Gnostic followers had learned to expand by absorbing these outcasts.

"…Please…even just the baby…!"

The woman lurched forward, holding up the child—and the *third arm* hidden behind her shot out, swiping with jagged claws.

"……!"

Gnostic Hunters had a hard rule to never hear out a plea—to avoid surprises like this. Chloe's team stepped back, dodging the wild swings. This opened a gap wide enough for the woman to bolt through, headed for the stairs. Her last hope.

"Ignis."

But it was not to be. One of Chloe's companions fired a spell at the woman's back. Mother and child were enveloped in flames and collapsed on the stairs. The baby's wails echoed through the basement. The mother staggered, clutching her child, glaring at the mages through the fire. Clear loathing in her eyes.

"You'll pay for this…! All of you! This will come back to haunt you!"

Her final shriek was seared into Chloe's brain. A sight she could not escape and would never forget.

"…Haven't you taken enough…?"

The goblin elder lay dying before the burning embers of his town. Treatment of demis without civil rights was even harsher, and mere suspicion of Gnostic activity often led to villages being burned to the ground without any attempt to confirm the truth. Chloe despised the practice; it made no difference what she felt nor whether these demis really were Gnostics. More often than not, by the time she reached the scene, the fight was already in progress.

“…Where will this lead…? All the lives you burn… A city built on corpses…”

Chloe had no answer. She already knew. If a Gnostic Hunter survived a battle, the next fight was the only thing waiting for them.

“…If you torch…even your own heart…what is left…?”

With those words, the goblin drew their last breath, leaving her standing with fists clenched. To end this fight for good required a fundamental change.

“It took me a whole lot of punch-ups, but I finally figured it out.”

This one was different. This wasn’t from his mother’s soul—it was Oliver’s own memory.

This was how he remembered her. Her tone stayed bright no matter the subject, but on this one occasion, she’d grown grim. Oliver had listened carefully, sensing that this was really important.

“Even the Gnostics have people they love. Just like I love you and Ed, Noll. They have family and friends they can’t bear to lose. All they want—when you get down to it—is a world where no one gets in their way.”

Coming from the most lauded Gnostic Hunter of her day, this was unthinkable. Yet, Oliver also thought it was very much *her*. Coming to understand her foes by exchanging blows with them—that was how Chloe Halford had *always* communicated.

“Dragging in alien gods is just a means to that end. It’s never the goal. And we’ve gotten that wrong this whole time.”

This was her regret and a lesson for him. And he took it as such. His mind was young, not fully formed, yet it tried to grasp her meaning. Chloe saw that and smiled, then gave her young son a big hug, whispering in his ear.

“Noll, I’m gonna teach you a spell that can make the whole world better.”

She didn’t mean it to be, but these words became the lynchpin of his life.

“It’s easy. We all just have to get a little bit nicer. That’ll make the world get better, too. That alone will end the Gnostic wars.”

He’d been so young, the memories were fuzzy. But he had believed in that magic.

Oliver pushed Karlie’s arms away, but that seemed to snap the strings holding him. He landed on his knees.

Palms on the ground, a torrent of vomit. His comrades gasped. The bloody vomit was filled with chunks of a necrotic, ejected lung, and the pool below him was the size of a throw rug.

“Noll!” Shannon shrieked. The constant healing only added to his pain, but if she stopped—he’d be dead. She had never had any choice but to inflict ceaseless torment upon him.

“…We…”

The last of the blood out, a whisper fell from his lips. So faint that only Karlie heard.

“We can’t…let them put anyone else…through the wringer…”

He sounded delirious. But this was a vow that had never once changed, no matter how much his loathing of their enemies corrupted his heart, no matter how many times he shattered his own soul.

Lives as tinder, Oliver thought. *That tinder fuels the flames of this madness.* No one—be they demis, ordinaries, even other mages—hesitated to sacrifice their *own* lives. That was the way of the mage, a slate that could hardly be wiped clean. The mad old man was guilty of it, as was Oliver himself.

In a world run by mages, lives were but a means to an end.

In the pursuit of sorcery, hearts were there to be trampled.

That was what made it so tantalizing. If the world could just be a little bit—even a tiny bit—nicer.

Then maybe his mother wouldn’t have died like that.

Maybe his father wouldn’t have suffered the way he did.

Maybe his sister could have escaped this torment.

Maybe his brother would be free of sin.

Maybe Alvin Godfrey could have been a great student leader without being anyone’s final visitor.

Or Carlos Whitrow could have been by his side, best friends for life.

Or Ophelia Salvadori could have been there laughing with them.

…And maybe, just maybe—Oliver could have stayed a happy boy who made everyone laugh.

A comedian who lived a life full of smiles.

He knew better. Those were all just dreams. What was lost would not return.

But still. Even so.

His heart yearned to use this life for a world where those things were possible.

He put his feelings into words. Just as his mother once wanted—the one thing of hers Oliver had sworn to hold to, steadfast, forevermore:

“…So the nice things…can stay nice…!”

Karlie’s gaze turned grim. Her comrades tightened their grips on their athames.

This was a lord worth dying for.

“…Okay,” she said. “You got it, Your Majesty.”

She patted him gently on the shoulder. He’d bet his life to buy them two minutes. And they’d used it to decide their course of action.

Karlie spoke over her shoulder to one of their comrades, the one she’d been closest to.

“Robert. Go on ahead.”

Blunt and to the point. Robert knew exactly what she meant and made a face.

“Y-you could s-soften it a bit. I am y-your husband.”

“Shut up. This ain’t the time for griping, sourpuss! I bore three kids for you.”

When she still didn’t pull any punches, Robert smiled.

“Yeah. And I can’t thank you enough.”

Perhaps the first time in his life he’d expressed his feelings without stumbling over the words.

With several other comrades, Robert stepped forward. Realizing what that meant, Gwyn started to speak, but—

“The rest is yours,” Karlie said, dusting off her hands. “We’ll crack it open for you.”

Then she looked down at Oliver.

“…Our youngest didn’t turn out so good. Might not make it as a mage.”

The boy listened in silence. Carving this into his memory so that he might not forget. Knowing it was her last words.

“If you can make this a world where a kid like that can be happy, well… I couldn’t ask for more.”

Oliver nodded. This was all he could do, the greatest honor he could grant.

“Sorry I was harsh on you,” Karlie said, grinning. “Bye, Your Majesty.”

And with that, she made eye contact with her husband one last time. Robert’s team of six ran straight toward the machine god.

Enrico frowned down at them from his perch. Their plan seemed foolhardy.

“Mm…? A desperate last charge?”

They were firing spells at the golem’s knee. Scarcely any threat to him at all.

“Such a shame,” the mad old man said. His foes really should have surrendered. “Such a waste of life!”

A giant palm slammed down from above, flattening Robert’s team in a single blow. Oliver gulped—but Karlie just grinned.

“We won’t waste a single one of ya.”

Her eyes were locked on the hand that crushed them—which *shook*. The vibration moved up the wrist, traveling along the arm. Puzzled, Enrico tried to lift it, then realized…he couldn’t.

“A curse crafter’s true value comes in death. Right, Robert?”

As she spoke, the machine god’s entire right arm turned toward its own head. Metal clashed against metal. The impact left the driver’s seat rocking, and Enrico instinctively grasped what had happened.

“Oh d-dear…!”

All six dead mages had been curse crafters, Robert included. They might not have been in Baldia Muwezicamili’s league, but they had quite a lot of curse energy stored. And the law of curse conservation meant everything they were harboring flowed into the machine god.

And Dei Ex Machina ran on cursed energy from the lives that fueled them. The newly added curses mingled with the existing energy, and the focused purpose Robert’s team had died with provided a new direction: kill Enrico.

“Hnggggg!”

The result was that one arm was completely out of his control and pounding away at the driver’s seat. He tried holding it back with the left arm, but before he could, the right arm got its palm wrapped around the head, firing the purple light he’d used against the wyverns.

“Ngahhhhhh!”

The machine god’s head was melting. The heat had already reached the driver’s seat, and Enrico was desperately using the one arm he had to try and stop it. He got a hold of the wrist and pulled the right arm away, but it took all his strength to keep it in check.

“My man does good work.”

And while both hands were occupied, Karlie and two comrades flew in, landing right above the driver’s seat. The head’s armor had partially caved in before getting melted by the purple light. The trio pointed their athames at it and did not hesitate.

“““Magnus Fragor Ultimata Omnisvitae.”””

The limit-breaking quadcant caused their bodies to explode. Even as they died, none of them lost control of the spell, and the impact of it hammered home a single point. The driver seat’s armor was already heavily damaged, and this new spell dug deep.

“Kya—kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! So close! But not enough to break—”

But even as Enrico thought his armor had held—a blood-soaked robe caught the corner of his eye.

“Gladio.”

The armor-cutting spell sliced a triangle in the last of the adamant and pierced straight through, taking Enrico’s left arm. With the other arm, he managed to activate the emergency eject. He and his seat were flung free, and a deceleration spell slowed his landing.

“…Magnificent.”

The slice Teresa had taken from his side, and now the arm Oliver had claimed. Both the mad old man's wounds were still oozing blood, and behind him, the machine god collapsed with a roar.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Without a second to catch his breath, Oliver's broom came rocketing in close. All surviving comrades were hot on his heels. Enrico barely managed to dodge their opening salvo, but he was out of golems to protect himself with.

"No way out, hmm?" he said, wincing. "Kya-ha-ha-ha. Why would there be?"

The moment a Gnostic is detected, they become a prime target to mages everywhere.

In order to have any chance of survival, they must ensure that no mages realize they are Gnostics. They *must* keep their faith hidden.

But that is easier said than done. Tír gods give their faithful many favors, but the cost of these is invariably a strict oath. To remain a believer, one has to follow ordained rules. The nature of these varies by the god in question, but one thing they all have in common—is how hard they are to hide.

They might grow strange plants in their gardens.

They might have unexplained eating restrictions.

They might meet regularly in the dead of the night.

If he had been watching carefully all along, he might well have spotted the signs.

"…Mm…?"

The first sign the boy saw was black smoke rising ahead of his broom.

At first, he assumed some farmers were doing a controlled burn. But as he drew closer to town, that was ruled out. There was too much smoke. That was not *controlled*.

Was a building on fire? Concerned, the boy flew faster. Fall had passed, and the first snow had recently fallen. The faster he went, the more the frozen air stung his cheeks. White breath trailed in his wake.

Ordinaries often struggled with fire, so he was worried. It was hard to put fires out without magic, and breathing even a little smoke could kill them. He was scared for Noemi. If there really was a fire, and she got caught in it, he had to save her.

If only it had been *just* a fire.

When he reached the skies above the town, he found a good 80 percent of it aflame.

"…Huh…?"

Unable to believe his eyes, he spent several seconds just gaping.

There were flames leaping skyward from every corner of the town. The red glow mingled with belching black smoke obscuring everything, but from beneath it, he could hear yelling and screaming. Occasionally he saw figures moving. The closer he got, the stronger the flames. Half the buildings had already fallen.

This could not happen in any accidental fire. It was easy for fire to spread in the dry winter weather, and towns like this always had steps taken to prevent that. Whether this town had done a good job of that was another question, but the roads were wide enough that there was little risk of flames crossing them, and once the fire started, the villagers would not stand idly by. They'd pour water on it, and if that was too late, knock the house down—and prevent it ever getting this bad.

In that moment, the boy was unable to imagine any reason why that wouldn't have happened. He learned the reasons later—that more than half the residents were Gnostics, and that a conflict had broken out within the faith regarding practices that could not be made public. A group of villagers advocating for abandoning their faith had taken violent steps, moving from one godtree to the next, setting them on fire. This had split the town against itself, leading to all-out war. And the result—was literally divine retribution.

"Ah ——— wahhhhhhh!"

Snapping out of his stupor, he lowered the pitch of his broom, dropping rapidly. The heat buffeted him, but he was in no shape to care. He held his breath through the smoke, flying directly to the girl's house.

"Noemi! Where are you? Are you in there? Yell if you can hear me!"

It was on fire but not yet leveled. He did a circuit of the three-story building, calling her name, eyes and ears peeled for any sign of her. Finally he caught a faint voice.

"Here?"

Following that lead, he slammed through a third-story window, shutters and all. He let go of the broom before he hit the far wall, rolling across the floor. He banged into a bunch of furniture and knickknacks, but pain didn't matter now. On his feet, he looked around, then heard noises and ran next door. And found who he was looking for. Noemi, her back against the wall, surprised to see him here.

"Noemi, you okay? Can I—?"

"Stay back, Enrico! Run!"

Only now did he hear the word she'd been screaming. The urgency in her voice gave him pause, and a heavy blow caught the air in front of him. He jumped backward and only then saw his attacker. A strange, twisted mass of plant, impossible to tell where root ended and vine began. Standing on two footlike things, like a twisted copy of a man.

"Augh! Wh-what is that?! A monster?! Where'd it come from?"

The threat, at least, was clear. He pointed his white wand at it.

"Don't come any closer! I will shoot!"

He tried to sound intimidating, but the tip of his wand would not stay still. But when a club made of vines swung up at him, he couldn't stay hesitant.

"Dammit! **Flamma!**"

He dived away from the blow, casting a spell. Even he was surprised by how strong it was, and the man-sized *thing* was enveloped in flame. It let out no scream nor showed any signs of pain as it burned. In time, it toppled forward, no longer moving. When he was sure it was done for, he wiped the sweat from his brow and turned back to his friend.

"…Let's get out of here, Noemi. On my broom! Don't worry, I'm better than—!"

"Dad!"

Her shriek cut him off, and he froze.

"……What?"

Noemi ran right to the charred remains at his feet. She reached for it, despite the lingering embers. But where she touched, it crumbled. She flinched, was silent for a long moment, and then slowly raised her head to the boy.

"…You…burned my father…"

Her face twitched, trapped between a smile and a sob. Like she'd tried to smile away the sad and failed. Tears ran down her cheeks, dripping into the ash and hissing as they evaporated.

He couldn't breathe. But as he stood there, his brain kept working. What he'd done, what he'd set alight—before his mind reached the answer, he forced the thoughts out of his mind. His instincts telling him he *shouldn't* know.

"W-we've gotta run," he said again. There was nothing else he could say.

They stared at each other in silence…and then the girl clutched her chest, keeling over.

"…Gah…… Ah……!"

"Noemi?! What's wrong? Are you hurt—?"

Scared, he reached for her—and found himself reeling backward.

"……?"

He wasn't sure what happened, but he felt a heat in his nose. Something warm ran into his mouth, and his tongue tasted of iron. His hand shot up to his face and came away crimson.

"……Run…Enrico……"

He'd been hit. As that realization dawned, Noemi got to her feet—moving funny. Her limbs turned in all directions, like a marionette with a layman's hands upon her strings.

"……It's not…me. I'm not…in control," Noemi rasped.

And he saw what was *wrong*. Countless rootlike things jutting out of her skin and clothes, swarming around her. There weren't too many yet—but they were clearly the same *thing* he'd just burned.

He knew—*something was* inside *her*.

"I'll—"

His vision tunneled. Cold sweat ran down his back. He lost all feeling in his limbs. Barely resisting the urge to scream his lungs out, even as Noemi grew steadily less human, he forced the words from his mouth.

"—I'll save you. I'll do something. I'll—I'll find a way."

"……En…rico……"

"I promise I will! I'm a mage. I can fix this with a wave of my wand!"

Shouting to drown out his fears, the boy brandished his white wand. Noemi's body staggered toward him, and he watched closely, thinking furiously. First, he'd have to stop her from moving.

"Sorry," he said, pointing his wand at her head. "Lemme put you to sleep. **Altum somnum!**"

An anesthetic spell to minimize her pain and injuries. She didn't even try to dodge. It hit home…but she still leaped forward. Surprised, he managed to jump aside in time.

"It didn't work?! Th-then… **Impediendum!**"

He switched to a paralysis spell. This time the spell landed right on her chest, and she swayed backward—but stayed upright. She was still coming after him, and he was starting to panic.

"…Why…? Why doesn't it work? Why…? Why…?!"

The boy ran through every means of stopping a foe he knew. Every means of inducing unconsciousness failed, and he was soon out of peaceful options—he was forced to switch to his athame and use force. He fired lightning and freezing spells at the legs, slowing it down, then moving closer to cut the roots off the surface of her body. He even stuck his blade inside her—avoiding critical areas—and chanted a spell, healing magic designed to strengthen the immune system. Trying everything he could think of, even if it hurt her.

"…Me…"

When none of it worked, and he was left standing there, out of options, Noemi's voice came as a whisper. His eyes turned to her lips as she echoed the words once more.

"…Burn me, Enrico…"

It felt like an icy hand clenched around his heart.

"……You can't…say that……"

"……Please…… I can't hold on……"

Her rasping plea came again. Her voice the only thing she still controlled, but that, too, would not last long.

"……It's…not just my body. My thoughts… They're going wrong. I want… to *plant* something…in you. That urge… It's growing stronger… Pushing my feelings…to the side…"

The invasion of the sinister roots was pushing into Noemi's mind. They did not have much time left to speak. She could feel it coming, and her pleas grew even more desperate.

"……Burn me…like you did my father… You can do it… You're a *mage*…"

The boy shook his head, rejecting it out of hand. The one thing he wouldn't do.

"…Please, Enrico. Please…"

As she spoke, the arm trapped by the freezing spell twisted in an unspeakable direction. Her legs did the same, with a series of horrible creaks. The roots embedded deep in her were forcing her body into motion. The boy's grip on his athame tightened painfully, and Noemi gasped out one last plea.

"I don't…want to be…anything that…can't laugh…!"

"_____!"

The horror of it fully sank in. Noemi's mind, her very personality—was about to disappear for good. And he had no way of saving her from that fate.

All he could do was be here for her. Hear her last request.

While she was still human.

"……Thank you……"

He'd struggled with it for a long moment, but when his shaking hand pointed the blade at her—Noemi thanked him.

"…Promise me…one thing?"

"……What?"

He couldn't look at her. His eyes were on his feet.

Staring at the drops splattering against his toes, Noemi used the last of her strength to turn up the corners of her lips.

"……Lift your head."

His tearstained face rose—and he saw her smile. Noemi's smile. The thing he came to town to see, the thing that brought warmth to his heart.

"…Keep laughing, Enrico. Enough…for both of us."

He nodded. In that moment, the crybaby died.

"Ignis."

The funeral pyre lit, enveloping her body in an instant. All of it burned. The thing consuming her body, her pain, her smile. The happy times they'd shared.

In less than ten seconds, her body fell apart. But the flames kept burning where she'd been. The heat blasted the boy's face. He took a step closer, drawn to the heat and light.

"…Ah…"

He couldn't tear his eyes away. It was so beautiful. The fires of Noemi's life.

Her fire is as beautiful as her heart, the boy thought. She was always so warm because she had this heat inside her.

And he realized the irony of it.

Something that burned this marvelously *had been right in front of him all along*.

"……Ha……ha-ha……"

This would make *anything* move. No matter how big it was, the fires of life would set it in motion.

And he swore when the time came, he wouldn't hesitate. Never again would he cry and shake his head.

He'd already burned the thing that mattered most.

He could throw any kindling on the fire with a smile. He'd promised to laugh enough for the both of them.

"…Kya-ha-ha… Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha…… Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

He felt the flames of that day had never gone out, burning inside of him ever since.

“ _____ Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-haaa!”

The mad old man’s athame flashed, and three advancing comrades went down, blood spurting from their throats. Spells flew in, aiming for a spare momentary opening, but even down an arm, Enrico was dodging them all. A spell fired mid-dodge finished off yet another foe.

Oliver’s comrades were unsure how to attack. Even with gaping wounds in his side and shoulder, the old man hadn’t slowed—the crisis was clearly forcing him into peak performance.

“You thought you could take me now? Without my golems, down an arm? Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha! That was silly. Very silly. I’m Enrico Forghieri! This is easier than licking a lollipop!”

He slammed the words into his foes. The warped frames of his glasses finally gave up their grip and fell to the ground, the eyes behind them gleaming. The fire within was far from extinguished.

“Don’t worry, Noemi! I can handle this, just like you taught me!” he yelled. “Candy makes you smile! Smiles are invincible! I won’t lose to anybody!”

The old man’s madness never wavered. In the face of it, Oliver had to admit—the man was strong. His golems lost, his arm lost, vast quantities of blood and mana lost, all the advantages a builder had were long since gone, and *still* he remained a powerful foe. More tremendous than his talent or his techniques was his refusal to waver in the face of danger. Even driven this far into a corner, defeat never once crossed his mind.

That was Enrico Forghieri, the mage said to have advanced magical engineering a hundred years in a single generation. Oliver felt a sense of awe that was almost profound. He could practically see a wall around the man, a wall that pierced the heavens.

“ _____ Non.”

And yet.

He was closing in. Almost in range. He’d been kept at bay when the man still had his golem, but now Enrico was fighting his comrades head-on. Oliver hastened to join them. Feinting like he was casting a spell, then leaping off his broom instead, shoving off the ground into a forward lunge the moment he touched down.

“Kya-ha-ha-ha! Here comes the false sword!”

Enrico didn’t miss it. He was ready, in a mid-tier stance. Certain he could face down his foe and finish him off. Confident in the skills the years had given him.

As his lunge began, the tip of Oliver’s athame rose ever so slightly. As his last step began, he reached one-step, one-spell range. The next instant would spell death for one of them.

The old man had made but one mistake.

Borrowed or taken. False or facsimile. Though it may pale compared to the real thing—

—at this distance, *certainty* was on the boy’s side.

“ _____ !”

Every future lay before him, the outcome his to choose. The torrent of time pushed against him.

Dismissing countless fatal outcomes, he plucked a single strand.

He had walked a bloody path, making sacrifices for which there were no amends.

And at the end of it, at his destination—was a present he could never have reached without each and every one of them.

The fourth spellblade—Angustavia, the abyss-crossing thread.

The riposte of a lifetime shattered every wall and pierced the old man’s heart.

“…Kya…ha.”

The laugh halted. Strength faded from Enrico’s arm, and his athame slipped from his fingers.

It hit the ground with a shrill *clink*, sounding the quiet end to their long battle.

It was over. The wyverns continued to flee, leaving an eerie hush over the fifth layer’s canyon.

“…You hit the flaws in the design…,” Enrico said, lying on his back at Oliver’s feet. “When I designed Deus Ex Machina…I admit, I backburnered defense against curses. That weapon was only designed for battle against tír gods. I never intended it to fight human mages. If the mana packing efficiency had been higher, perhaps I could have retained control…”

“……”

“…But that’s just an excuse. I knew the risk of using curses as fuel from the get-go. Allowing you to take advantage of it was my oversight, and a credit to Mr. Dufourcq and his team for spotting the weakness and striking it. Such…magnificent students.”

Enrico sang praises to the fallen.

There, Oliver cut in. “Nothing else to say?” he asked, his voice devoid of warmth.

Enrico’s remaining hand scrabbled at his pocket, pulling out a lollipop and offering it up.

“…Would you like some sweet candy? To celebrate your victory?”

Oliver batted the candy aside and pointed his athame at his dying foe.

“Dolor.”

And the torture began. Enrico was racked by incredible pain, the same that once hit this boy’s mother. But even then, all it earned him was another peal of mad laughter.

“Kya—kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“…Stop that. Stop laughing. Don’t you fucking laugh!”

With this explosion of rage, the mask fell from Oliver’s face. For the first time, Enrico recognized him.

“…Mr. Horn. So it was *you*.”

Oliver tried to cast another pain spell, but Gwyn pinioned his arms.

“That’s enough! I’ll cast for you—!”

“Lemme go!”

Oliver tried to throw him off, but Gwyn was begging.

“Please, Noll… You’re at your limit… And so is Shannon…!”

“…?!”

Oliver spun around, looking behind him. Shannon was there, white wand raised, tears streaming down her cheeks. As long as Oliver’s breaking body wielded magic, she was forced to keep healing, to prolong her cousin’s suffering.

And that forced him to stand down.

Looking up at him, Enrico asked, “…Are you related? To Chloe?”

“…My mother,” Oliver croaked, his fists clenched tight.

“Oh,” the old man said, his smile forlorn. “There really is no resemblance. How sad.”

“……!”

Unable to find a retort, Oliver gritted his teeth again. He knew the man wasn’t even trying to wind him up; he was just being honest. Oliver knew better than anyone that it was true.

Still holding Oliver’s athame hand down, Gwyn stepped forward and aimed his own athame at Enrico in his injured cousin’s stead. It took several seconds of silence before Oliver could bring himself to accept this kindness.

“The answer to this question will be your final act,” he began. “Why did you do that to my mother?”

He had always planned to ask this.

“You ask that *now*?” Enrico said, raising an eyebrow. “Surely, you *must* know what she was trying to do to the world.”

The answer he’d expected. But he clenched his jaw even harder.

“And you couldn’t handle that? That she was trying to keep the progenitor vow?” Oliver demanded. “Not just saving those you deem *people* but the other demis and Gnostics, too?”

“No? In fact, I thought that was very *her*. I couldn’t imagine Chloe doing anything else! Just—we had a drastic difference of opinion. We disagreed beyond all hope of reconciliation. And she was a great woman. She could well have changed the world… And so we killed her.”

Enrico spoke with ease, but the words left Oliver shaking his head.

“…I’d like to make a hundred—no, a thousand concessions!”

“…Mm?”

“When your difference of opinion reached a fever pitch, you struck first, betraying my mother and assassinating her. I can look at that sequence of events and even comprehend certain parts! Accept, absolutely not, but… begrudgingly understand.”

He had looped through this thought so many times before. What twist of fate had led his mother to that end? Gathering every scrap of information he could, trying to find a reason that made *sense*. Doing so was the only thing that kept the hatred from burning a hole in him. But no matter how fine a

microscope he used, no matter how thoroughly he examined his enemies' positions, one fact still stood before him.

"But if that's true, then *why* did you make her *suffer*? Not satisfied with just killing her, the seven of you inflicted every form of torture on her, stealing her very soul! What possible justification is there for *that*?!"

Oliver's voice had become a howl. His mother had not just been slain; she'd been beaten to death. Stabbed through the heart by a trusted friend, and when she could no longer fight back, subjected to every torment imaginable. He knew *all* of it. The memories and experience he gleaned from merging with Chloe Halford's soul were by no means complete, but the agony of her final moments was definitely there.

And Enrico peered through the boy's rage, spying the truth inside, and with the clarity afforded only to those who know they are about to die.

"I see! That's the core of your grudge. Not the fact of your mother's death, but the assault on her person."

"So answer me!" Oliver yelled. "If it weren't for that, I might not have been driven to this point! I might not be defiling her sword with these despicable acts!"

He remembered again what his mother had told him. "Get angry with the unreasonable. But try not to hate. That'll turn into a poison that eats you up from the inside. Forgiveness will save your heart most of all."

"Maybe I could have managed it. Eventually, in time…maybe I could have let this grudge go."

He could no longer hold back the tears. The more he thought about her torment, the more he hated the sorcerers who'd trampled her dignity—the further his life grew from what she'd wanted for him. His loathing corrupted the sword he gleaned from her soul, and he had long lived with the sin of that.

Yet, he'd made his choice. He'd chosen to follow this path for the sake of the future she might have brought to pass.

"…You really hate yourself," Enrico said. Once again, he saw it all: love for a mother, hatred for her killers, the ordeals he inflicted on himself, the crippling weight of this burden—and the screeching void that had been left in the boy's heart. With all the friction and conflicts he shouldered, it was nothing short of miraculous that he was still in one piece.

There was irony in the boy's strength, the old man thought. He could tell this intense self-hatred was a key reason this boy could withstand the pain of the soul merge. This boy yearned to be punished and therefore accepted both the denial of self and the shattering of his soul.

"I wish I could answer you, but I'm afraid that's not possible. I'm not trying to be dramatic; I simply don't have what you seek."

Oliver glared at him like he was trying to kill with looks alone.

Enrico's tone didn't even waver.

"Our treatment of Chloe was symbolic. We pulled her star down to earth, desecrated it, and trampled it beneath our feet. Like proof of our shared

complicity," he said. "Even mages can conceive of sin. Especially when casting a great soul into the fire. The feats she might have done, the bright and shining future she might have brought to pass, the possibilities now lost—all of that weighs upon our shoulders."

"……"

"Achieving results that can make up for that loss. That is the task set before us, as mages. Even if no such thing exists."

A faint sigh escaped the old man's lips. Chewing over this answer, Oliver asked, "…The torture was neither a means nor a predilection, but…the shared experience itself was the goal?"

"That was *my* perception of it, at least. If you ask the others, you may get a very different response. Even I cannot begin to imagine what was going through their minds."

Enrico shrugged, staring up at the boy.

"But the answer you want is nothing so intangible."

"……"

"In which case, I am not the one you should be asking. Speak to Esmeralda. It was her idea to torture Chloe and steal her soul. Thus, she alone knows the reason for it."

But even as he provided a lead, he had to laugh.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Good luck with that, though. Getting a real answer out of her, as she is now…?"

Further talk would teach him nothing more. Oliver put his athame to his foe. As weak as the man's breathing had grown, his life had entered the final countdown either way.

"Are we done?" Enrico asked. "Then one last piece of advice."

"You think I'll just let you talk?"

"Do listen. It's for your benefit."

There was a strength to the mad old man's voice, something in his eyes Oliver could not ignore. And so he stayed his hand.

"I'm sure you are well aware that going up against the witch of Kimberly is akin to turning on the whole of the magical world. Against the very systems that our world runs upon."

"……"

"Chloe might have been able to pull it off. That, I won't deny. That is why we feared her. However—can you do the same?"

Oliver said nothing. And to that silence, the old man offered a parable.

"An ordinary pot and molten gold made from half of a priceless urn. That's what we have here. You swing your hammer and smash the pot, piercing the pieces together to contain the gold. Smash and weld, smash and weld. That's all your merges with Chloe's soul are accomplishing."

"……"

"But no matter how much you hurt yourself, you will never be gold. You're nothing but a patchwork chimera. The more you chase after Chloe,

the more you reach out desperately toward her light…the farther you will get from it and the more you will hate yourself."

Oliver offered no rebuttals, felt no irritation. Just the empty nothing of being told something you already know.

"Your best choice would be to pursue an entirely different path. Forget everything and move to some remote location, bury yourself in the activism of the civil rights crowd or find somewhere to look after the ordinaries. Any one of those would suit you well." Enrico then asked:

"Haven't you done enough? You got Darius and me. That's very impressive! Chloe would be proud."

Silence was sufficient to reject this proposal. There had never been a way to turn back. Especially now that he'd thrown so many lives on the pyre.

"…But if you choose otherwise…"

Enrico went on, pouring what little life he had left into this warning.

"…then along this thorny path…at least meet someone. Not a replacement for Chloe, but someone all your—"

He was interrupted by a blood-laced cough. As Oliver stared down at him, it turned into a fit.

"…Kya-ha-ha. Pity. I'm afraid…I can speak no more."

Realizing this, his hand—almost reflexively—reached for his pocket. He felt around inside.

"…Oh… I'm out of candy…"

Deprived of this comfort, he looked terribly sad.

"…We'll have to go get some more. What flavor would you like…?"

As the light died from his eyes, he spoke like a little boy again. Lowering his athame, Oliver listened, forgetting all about finishing him off.

"…I like cherry best." Enrico answered his own question. "Same color as your cheeks…"

There was a bashful smile on his lips, his eyes on a sunrise from the distant past.

And with his last words addressed to someone precious—the old man breathed his last.

Gwyn took a knee, his hand moving about the body. The final confirmations. Then he turned to his cousin and nodded.

"……It's done, Noll."

Oliver stood where he was, letting it wash over him. There was no joy in this victory, no shouts of triumph. He could find nothing inside himself at all.

Thirty-two entered combat on the fourth and fifth layers.

Combat goal achieved. Enrico Forghieri slain.

Eleven comrades lost in battle.

With that, the second target of his revenge met his end—just as he'd wished.

Afterword

Greetings. This is Bokuto Uno.

Here we see the curtain fall on the second act of vengeance.

What sort of person is our boy? What tragedy does he bear? And what is the nature of his revenge? What you have just read will have told you all these things and more.

Power borrowed or taken. False or facsimile. The more desperately he strives, the farther the light becomes.

He has begun to forget the shape of his own soul. The border grows faint between sin and punishment, between salvation and destruction.

Where will a life like this lead him?

The loss of a second instructor will no doubt shake Kimberly.

This boy must weather that by deceiving his detested foes and fearsome upperclassmen.

And more than anyone—his closest friends, those who know him best.

When battles end, clandestine acts take their place. His own war has yet to reach the turning point.

Oliver has claimed a second target and set a third. Meanwhile, Nanao faces a trial of her own in the world of broomsports...
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Vol.6
Reign of the SEVEN SPELLBLADES
Bokuto Uno
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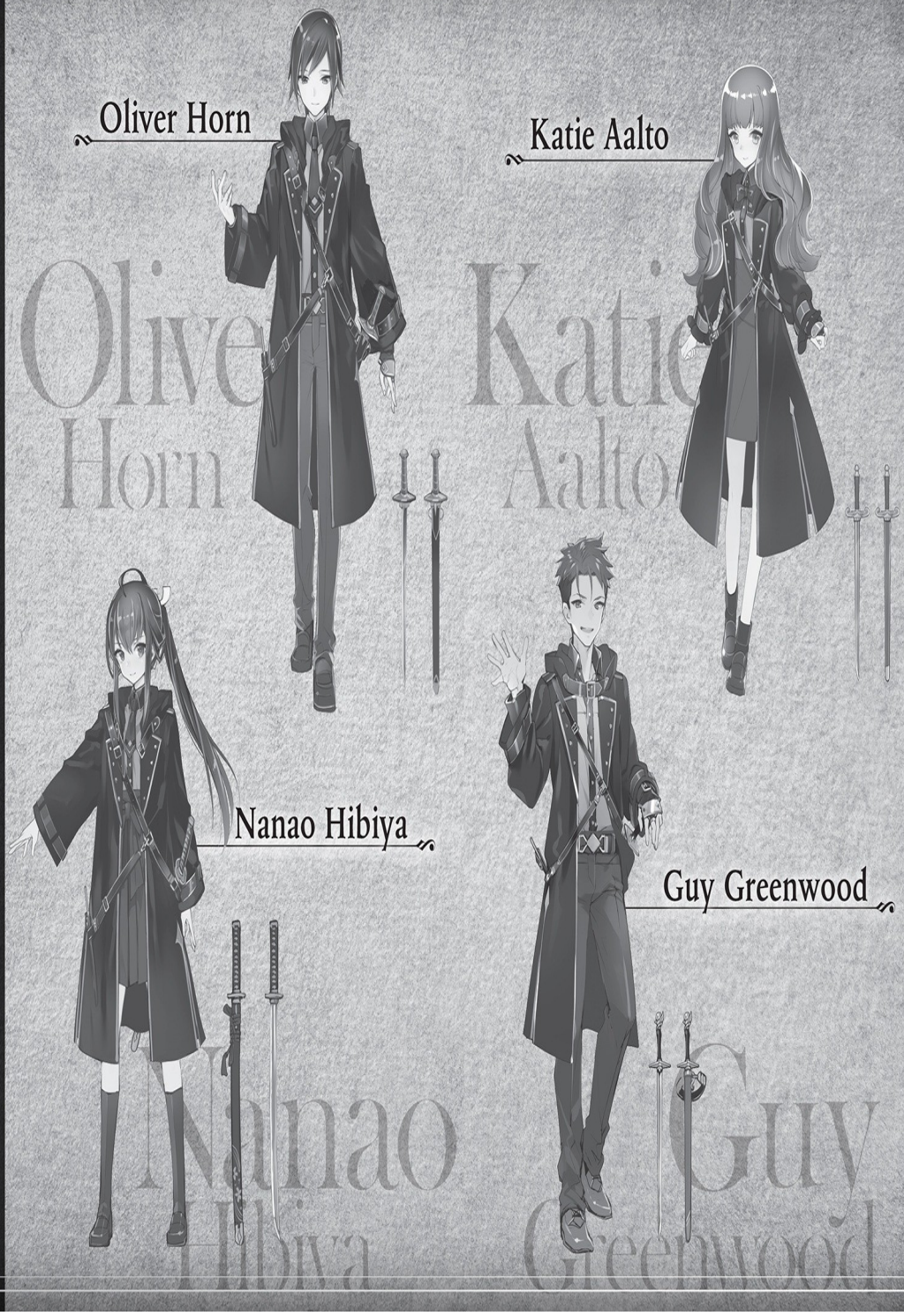

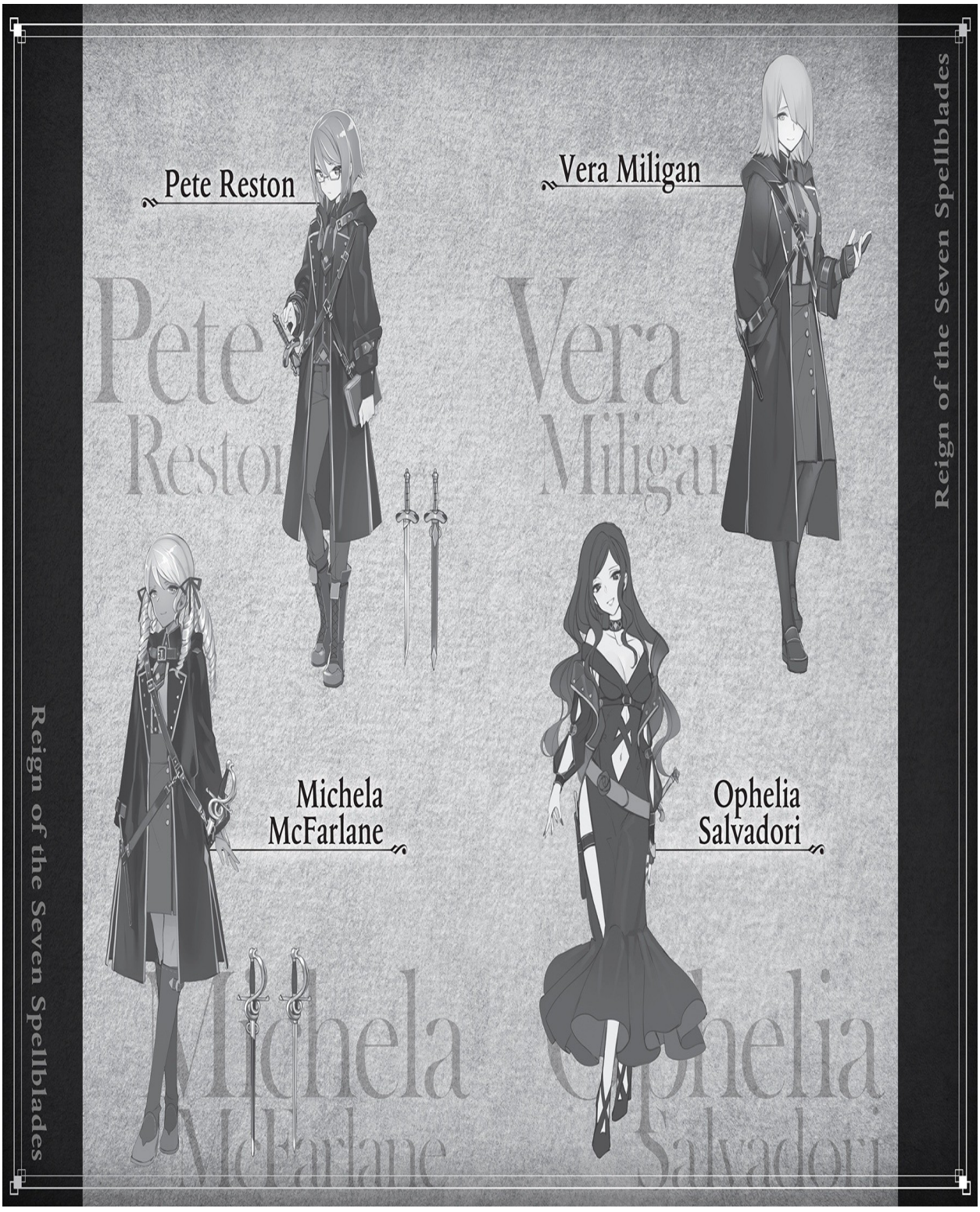
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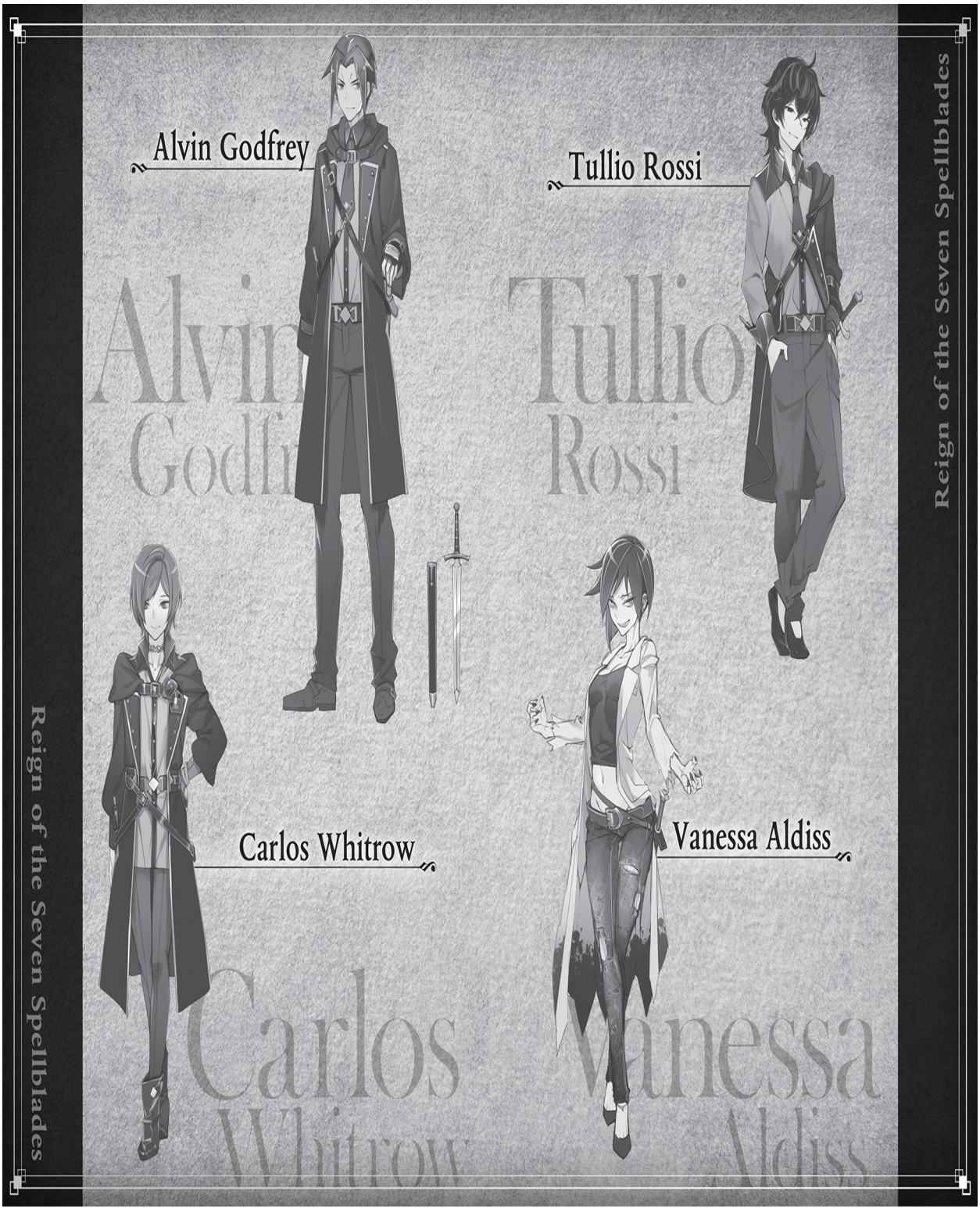
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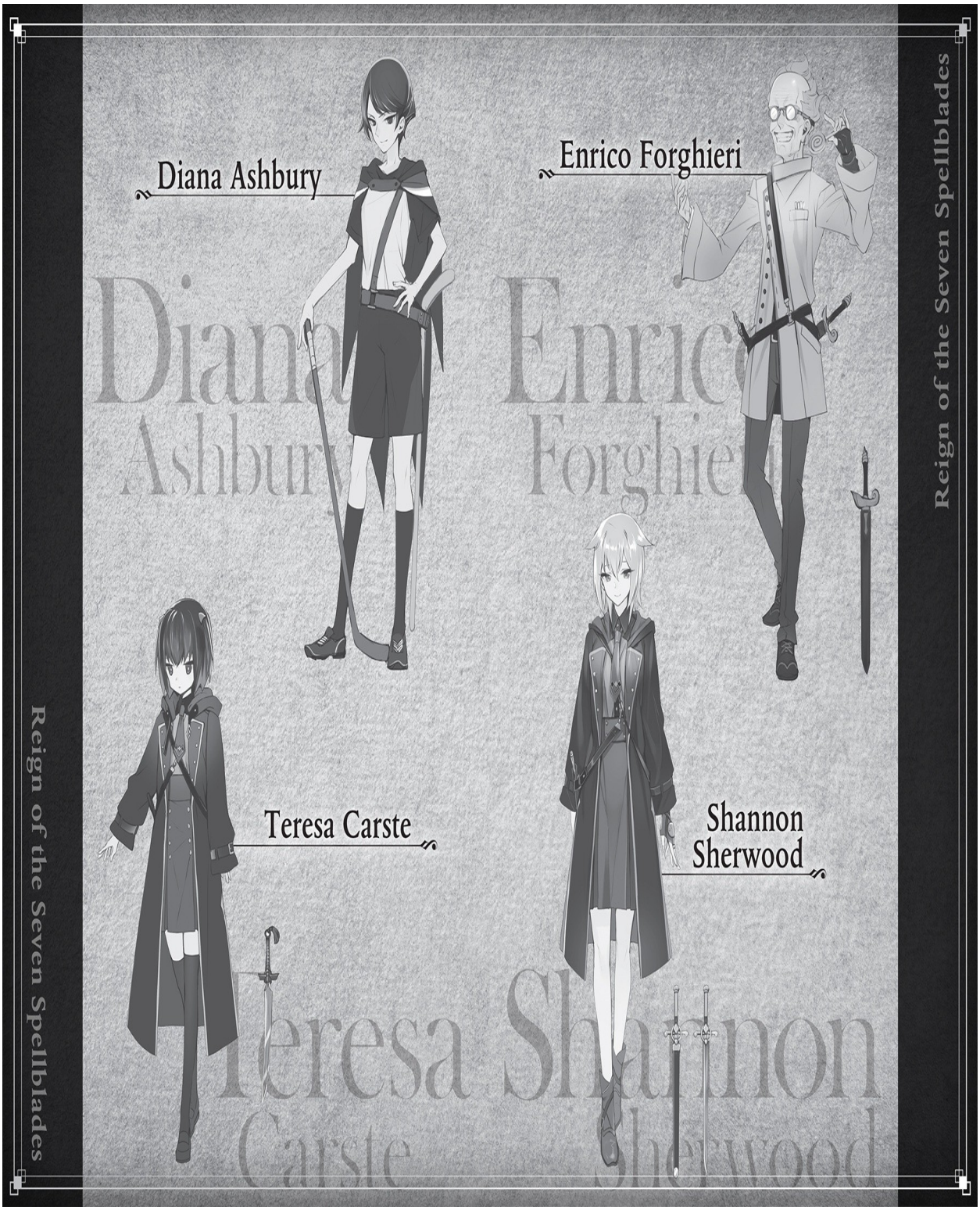
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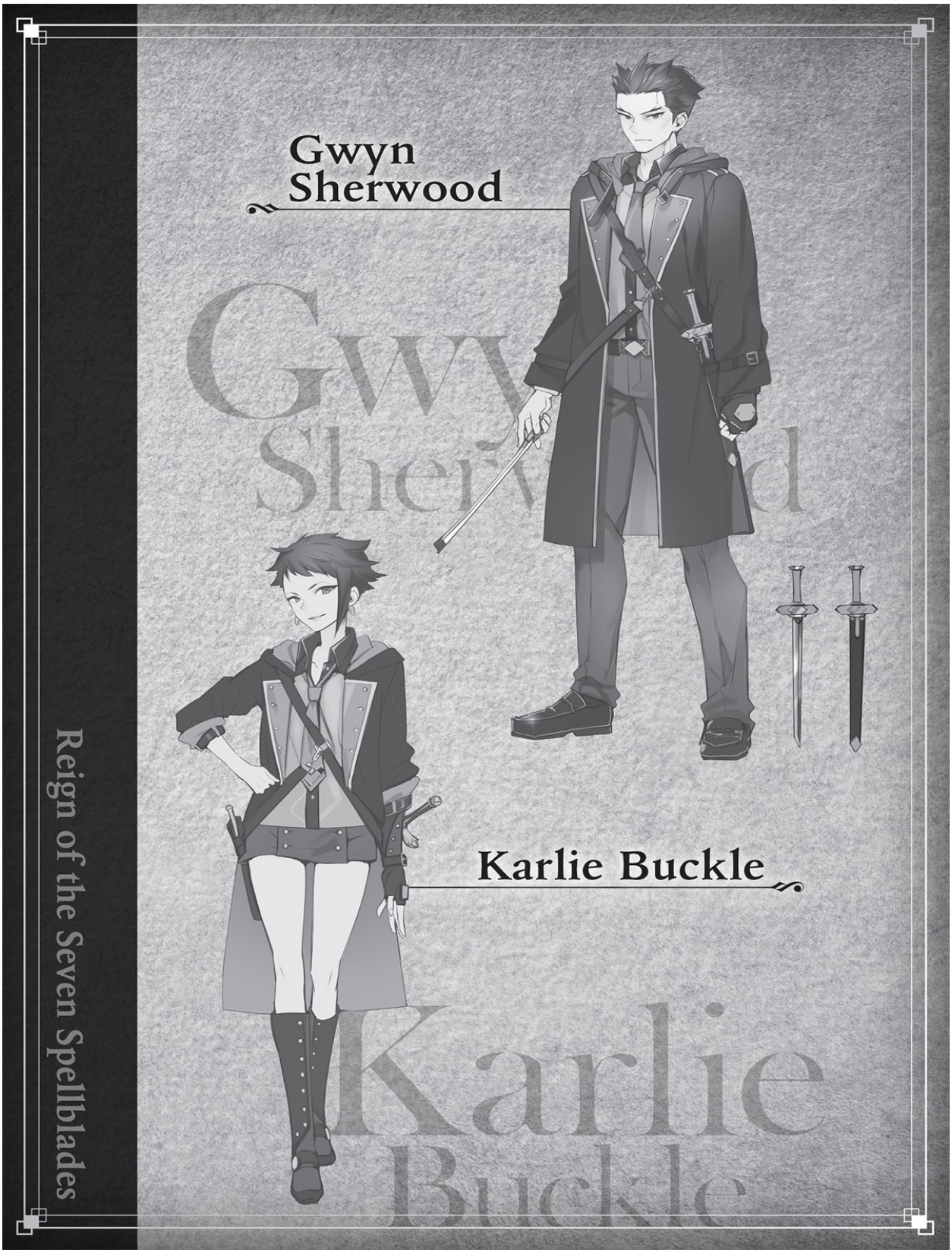
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